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HIGHLIGHTS

CITY OF VILLAINS [PC]

ROGUE GALAXY [PS2]

PERFECT DARK ZERO [XB360]

FINAL FANTASY XII [PS2]

CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS [PS2]

MARIO & LUIGI 2: PARTNERS IN TIME [NDS]

BLACK [PS2/XB]

180 PAGES OF BLUE SKY GAMING

EXCLUSIVE REVIEW

Live life the Nintendo way

The killer app for DS Wi-Fi gaming

Collector's Edition – A cover for all seasons

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Welcome to Animal Crossing Wild World

EXCLUSIVE REVIEW

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It certainly doesn't feel like **games™** has existed for three years… although there's no denying that we do feel more than a little older since its inception. Still, here we are – 40 issues old and kicking just as hard as when we started. It's a nice feeling, undoubtedly, especially since we recall the naysayers pointing and suggesting we wouldn't last longer than a year (and to you, we offer a large serving of word pie made lovingly with your own sentences). But that said, the word 'change' has been bandied around quite a lot lately and it's something that will be faced head on soon, like the charging bull that it is. After all, three years is a long time to look the same – just ask EA Sports – and so it's time to take the rug that is **games™** outside and beat the dust out of it. What's coming? We can't say. But only a fool would expect less than some new ideas, new elements and, no doubt, new concepts that might make people wave their fists in the air. Whether they do so in triumph or anger remains to be seen… but we'll find out soon enough, won't we?

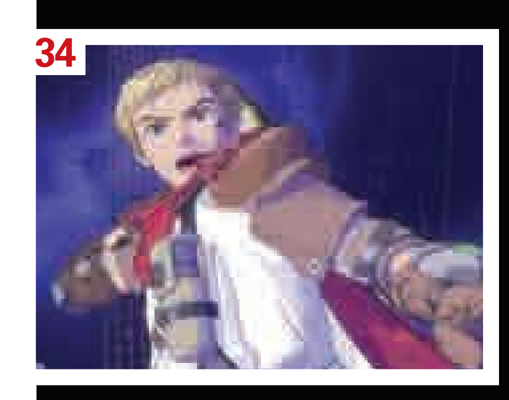
Martin Mathers
Editor


Animal Crossing
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Animal Crossing
Ricky Dog
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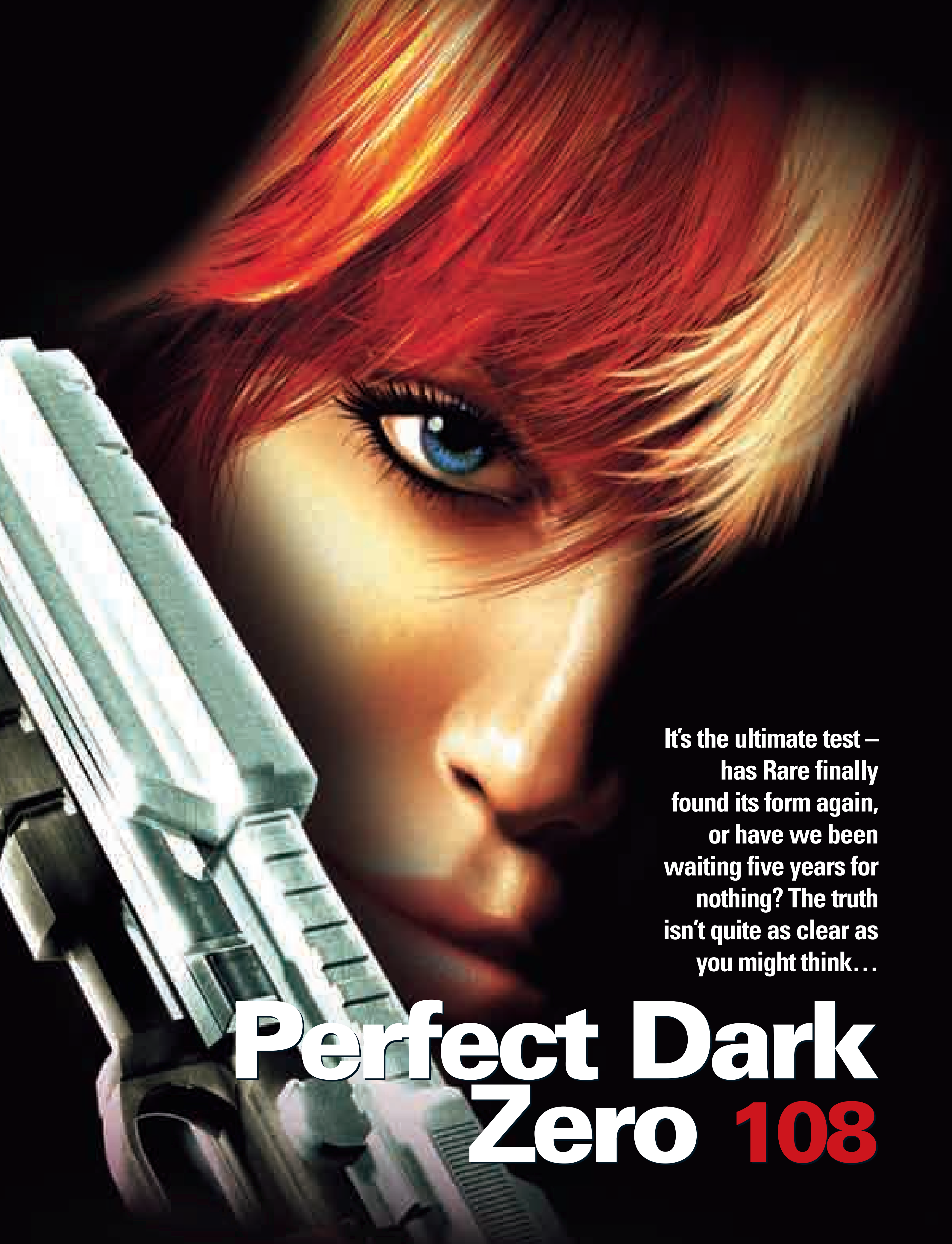
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It's the ultimate test – has Rare finally found its form again, or have we been waiting five years for nothing? The truth isn't quite as clear as you might think…
Perfect Dark Zero 108

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NEWS | INDUSTRY GOSSIP | OPINION

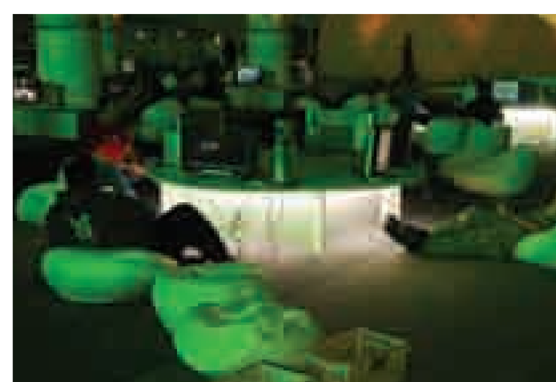
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FIND OUT WHERE TO GET THE ESSENTIAL STORIES WITH OUR QUICK GUIDE TO THE NEWS

MICROSOFT'S ORIGEN EVENT HERALDS THE ARRIVAL OF THE XBOX 360

THE END OF THE





BEGINNING

A two-day party in the desert, armed robberies and machines going for $3,000 on eBay after a total stock sell-out. All in a week's work for Microsoft's great white hope, the just-launched Xbox 360…

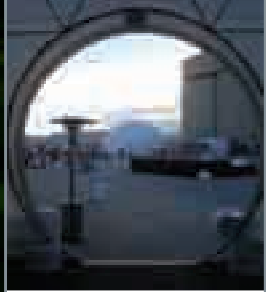
In an aircraft hangar in the Mojave desert at 9pm on 21 November, the first Xbox 360s were sold to Edgar Bounds and Mike Wylder, two Mississippi-based students. The other 298 units placed for the event were pre-sold by 6pm that day and receipts were said to be changing hands for $800 only an hour later.

As a whole, Origen – Microsoft's much-hyped US launch event – was a surprisingly relaxed and casual affair. No PR or marketing fluff in sight, just fun and games. The venue was almost as barren as the desert in which it was set, but every machine (bar a few EA Sports titles) were occupied for the entire day, with the systems' most high profile games – *Perfect Dark*, *Kameo* and *Project Gotham 3* – being the hardest machines to get any time on.

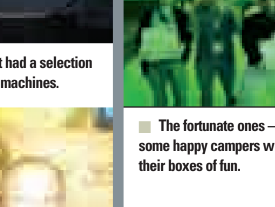
Those in attendance included Microsoft bigwigs Allard and Moore, the PMS clan's American arm (all of whom were rather lovely), Cliffy B of Epic and a number of fan boys and developers who got in through friends of friends (us included). Special 'on-site' painted faceplates were given out as prizes for on-stage competitions on *Dead Or Alive* and *Perfect Dark*, though disappointingly they were made to look like the standard ones on sale and thus un-eBay-able. Those who stayed on for the 9pm first console sales got to enjoy a performance from the band Louis XIV, as well as the sight of the ridiculously huge hangar doors opening to let in three Best Buy electronics store trucks with the allocated 360s.

Overall, it was a fantastic event which clearly considered gamers' needs. Those with special wristbands even got a free memory card so they could save a special 'Xbox Zero Hour Achievement' to use on their new Xbox live accounts and, of course, save any progress they made on games they played with that day.

As for us, we got our 360s and had a great time just hanging out in the mellow setting filled with great games, a cosmopolitan crowd – the majority of which was refreshingly NOT made up of the fat, sweaty, smelly gamer stereotypes – and comfy bean bags to park our arses in. If only E3 could be more like this…



As usual, Microsoft had a selection of specially-designed machines.



“IT SOUNDED LIKE PR BULL AT THE TIME, BUT THE XBOX 360 HAS DELIVERED WITH THE STUFF YOU CAN ACCESS ON THE BLADES.”
DAN JEVONS, UNION ENTERTAINMENT



The fortunate ones – some happy campers with their boxes of fun.



Dan Jevons – thankfully, the squishy cushion is completely detachable.



“Just put all the Xbox 360s in the bag and no-one gets hurt, okay bub?”

XBOX 360 REPORTS

GOSSIP SURROUNDING THE 360 DOES THE ROUNDS…

BUGS AND BURNING BOXES

Sadly, there was some bad news. Some poor folk found that their games wouldn't work with 360s and there were also reports of units overheating within three days of the getting the machine home, though these mostly popped up on message boards and dodgy blogs and thus had little credence. Personally, we only encountered the disc failure error a handful of times on day two and then it magically disappeared, possibly by a stealth software fix through the magic of Live.

We also found the best bug in the world – upon downloading the Smash TV demo and being asked midway through the game if we wanted to buy it, we pressed start and it took us to the Pause menu. Upon un-pausing, we were let back into the game and could finish the whole thing, meaning we didn't have to pay for the full game. We'll try this with *Gauntlet* and let you know if it works.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Many in attendance were suitably impressed with Microsoft's efforts. “I think for the first time, I've changed from the 'I don't give a shit about the extras, I just want the games' gamer, into someone in love with all the extras on the Xbox 360,” said Dan Jevons, creative director at Union Entertainment and the man behind Starbreeze's upcoming game, *The Darkness*. “I remember Microsoft saying it wanted to put the user in the centre of the experience and though it sounded like PR bullshit at the time, it's delivered with the stuff you can access on the blades and the whole community and general user experience on the machine. I'm very impressed. And *Call Of Duty 2* is f**king incredible. I'm also loving *Kameo* and *Perfect Dark*. They're not perfect, but they're definitely solid, enjoyable games.”

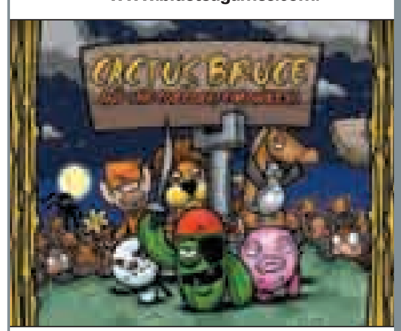
ARMED ROBBERIES AND EBAY

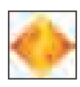
There were reports of people being mugged for Xbox 360s and a possible first – a store being held up for one (or two). According to Gamespot, an EB store in Stafford, Virginia was robbed at gunpoint. The greedy sod asked for two Xbox 360s, possibly wanting one for himself and the other for scalping punters who couldn't get one. Sadly for him, he was caught soon after. If he'd decided to search eBay for Microsoft's finest hour however, he'd have been the one getting robbed. In just one search we found two Xbox 360s going for $2,000 (pat on the back to auctioneer dr_finger_hut), six going for more than $1,000 and the rest averaging around the $800 mark. Shocking, considering the premium pack weighs in at half that amount in stores.

Data Stream
BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



PR PRESSURE
Winner of this month's 'totally useless, but still incredibly cool' item from PR companies trying to lure us into mention their product is Blue Tea Games, who kindly sent us a cactus dressed as a pirate to promote its new downloadable shareware game *Cactus Bruce And The Corporate Monkeys*. He's good, we're sure you'll agree. Thankfully, the game's rather interesting too, especially Marvin the exploding snowman and the fact that you have to fight off monkeys trying to take over your island. Bizarre. Check it out on www.blueteagames.com.





NUMBERS GAME
A survey conducted by research firm XTN Data has revealed that of all the next-gen consoles, it's the PS3 (there's a surprise) that UK gamers are most looking forward to. The survey of 1,000 people, found that 32 per cent of the UK public were planning to buy a PS3, with the 360 only slightly behind at 27 per cent. This means very little – 1,000 people is an extremely small segment of the UK market – but we're sure Sony bosses will be merrily touting the figure in the coming months.



NEW RESEARCH SHOWS DARK FUTURE FOR DEVELOPERS

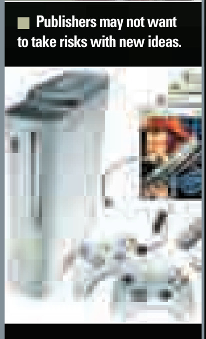
HIGH STAKES

Considering it's over 30 years old, the videogames industry shows a worrying lack of business sense and effective high-level management, according to a report published by UK research company Screen Digest. The research forecasts an even more licence and sequel-reliant business model for successful publishers, as well as rising development costs and the continued consolidation of the industry as smaller companies struggle to keep up with the rising costs of staying in the business. How, then, is gaming to cope with the challenges that lie ahead in the next generation and how did it end up in this position in the first place?

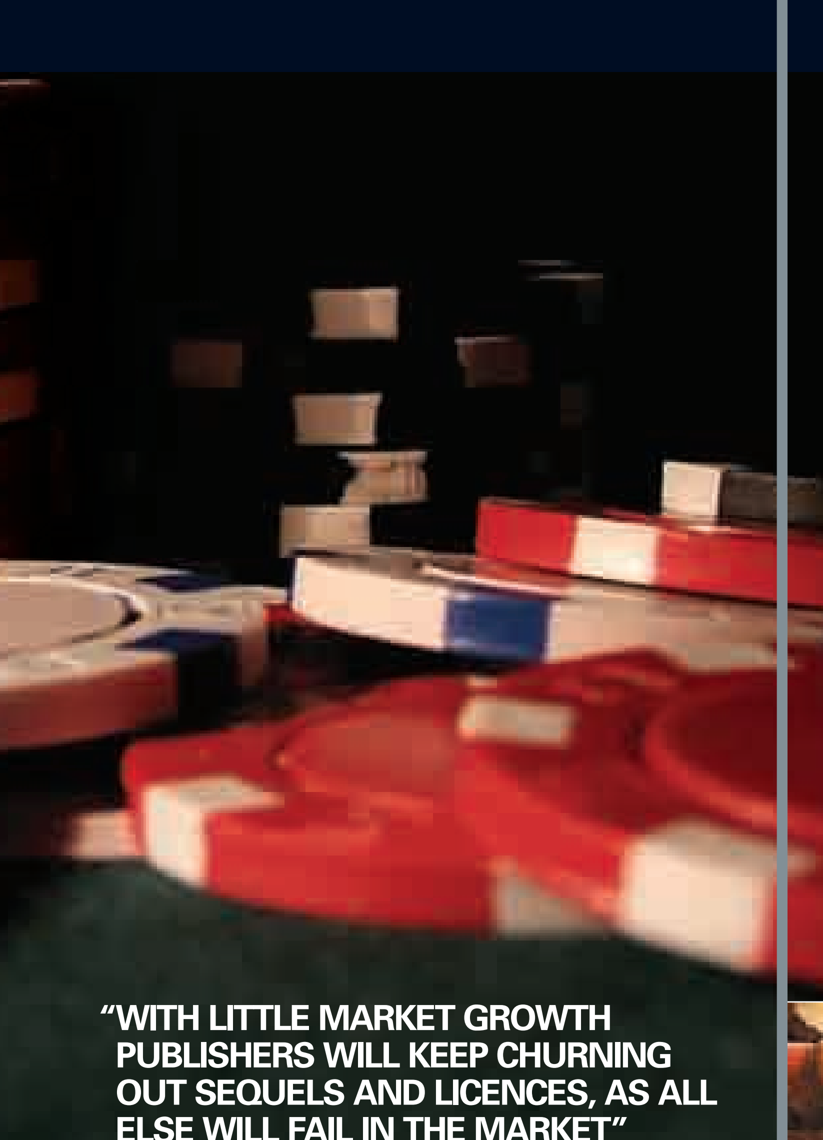
Videogaming's most obvious problem is its sheer rate of expansion. As technology marches ahead, creativity has taken a back seat to console manufacturers' priorities – a fact all but embodied by the current next-gen race as the Xbox 360 appears on the shelves with little genuinely inspirational new content to its name. New technology is leapt upon before it has time to reduce in cost – consequently, the industry's constant drive to remain at the cutting edge of new technology ends up costing developers millions in necessary development outlay.

At the midway point in this generation's lifecycle, development costs stood at around $3-6 million for the average title – still too much for smaller developers to be able to afford consistently. According to the Screen Digest research, costs at the midpoint of the next generation are set to rise to $6-10 million – that's up to a 100 per cent increase, where only between a nine and ten per cent increase in market growth is predicted over the next four years. This isn't good news – not for smaller developers, not for publishers and certainly not for gamers. As a result of these ridiculously high costs, the effects of a financially unsuccessful game will be even more pronounced and publishers will be even less inclined to take risks with new and creative content. As few as 80 games a year, according to the report's findings and predictions, are likely to make significant profit in the next-generation market.

■ Publishers may not want to take risks with new ideas.



■ Will consoles like the 360 and PS3 sap real creativity?



"WITH LITTLE MARKET GROWTH PUBLISHERS WILL KEEP CHURNING OUT SEQUELS AND LICENCES, AS ALL ELSE WILL FAIL IN THE MARKET"

Based on Screen Digest's figures, licensed products such as sports and movie-based games sell – on average – 23 per cent better than others. However, as licensers grow more aware of how important licensing is becoming to the gaming industry, the process is likely to get more expensive, meaning profits will fall.

The report's troubling findings display, in Screen Digest's own words, "An endemic lack of professional management." The industry is experiencing no expansion in demographic and creative scope to correspond with its escalating costs – it's a vicious cycle. With little market growth, publishers will continue to churn out the same sequels and licences because anything else will fail in the market, which means that fewer new consumers will be introduced to gaming, which means little market growth and so on. Coupled with rising costs, such a cycle could be indicative of a bleak future. Although greater consolidation and a more effective business strategy could save the industry, if new creative and demographic challenges are not explored, little is likely to change over the next decade.

SO WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

Screen Digest's report suggests that more effective management could help offset rising costs. Mobile and digital distribution of games could help, with games being available to a wider audience. PC online gaming is also set to double in profitability and exceed $2 billion by 2007. What we think the industry really needs is a change in ethos; without new, creative material to generate interest in a new, bigger generation of gamers – more women, for instance– there'll be no chance for gaming to expand its market during the next generation.



VIDEOGAME MUSIC CONCERT

AND WE'RE ACTUALLY REALLY PLEASED TO SEE IT

This column is usually somewhat derisory, but this month we have an exception. Aside from silly Americans who insist on whooping and cheering through lovely orchestral *Final Fantasy* concerts, classical videogame music concerts are a very good thing. It was with great pleasure, then, that we heard the news that JMP Productions (the outfit behind the fabulous *Dear Friends: Music from Final Fantasy* concerts) is starting a world tour next year named *Play! A Videogame Symphony*. Music from over 20 beloved titles will be played, including *Shenmue, Metal Gear Solid, Battlefield 1942* and *World Of Warcraft*. As before, giant screens depicting scenes and characters from the featured games will accompany the music.

For those interested, further information on tour dates, locations and ticket prices will appear on play-symphony.com over the next few months. "This spectacular concert will attract people of all generations to some of the world's greatest concert halls," says Arnie Roth, music director of the tour. Once again, it's very good to see videogame culture permeating more conventional cultural pastimes – we'll certainly be watching the website like a hawk over the coming months. Tickets are almost certain to sell out fast, so anyone keen to see the concerts (and frankly, we can't imagine an avid gamer who wouldn't be) will need to act quickly once the dates are announced.



Data Stream

BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



REIN STORM

After last month's report on Mark Rein's (Epic Games VP) Nintendo Revolution outburst, it's only right that we mention his recent bout of remorse. Saying that he'd been taken out of context, Rein has now explained that he wasn't "bashing Nintendo," but rather was saying that, "a by-product of having a device like this is that people are going to make games that are possibly just there because of the controller, as opposed to be being great games of themselves, and I said it badly, I regret that." Who can argue with that? Just shows how far a few poorly chosen words can go in this industry.

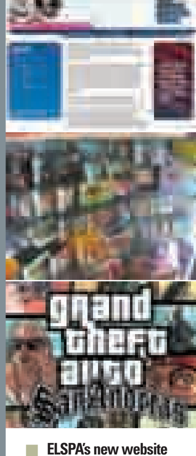




LONDON CALLING

King of the sales charts and champion of 'adult' gaming Rockstar is set to establish a new dev studio in our nation's capital. The London office is traditionally focused on publishing, marketing and PR operations, but the opening of a studio there reinforces Rockstar's intent: world domination. Currently, the firm has six studios, located in San Diego, Vienna, Edinburgh, Leeds, Toronto and Vancouver. If it means there's another talented group of developers producing top quality products, we're not about to complain.





ELSPA's new website aims to make games ratings easier to understand.

RATE IT RIGHT

ELSPA, PARENTS AND CONSOLE MANUFACTURERS UNITE TO GIVE AGE RATINGS MORE SIGNIFICANCE

As readers of the last few issues will know, games™ is very much in favour of age ratings. Following the violent videogames legislation that has been introduced in California and Florida recently – necessitating the application of a two-inch square '18' sticker on the boxes of age-restricted videogames in stores and introducing fines for inobservant retailers – the three major console manufacturers have almost simultaneously announced that next-generation machines will all ship with parental control options. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which has worked tirelessly to overturn the above legislation in America, has applauded the action, stating that it places the responsibility for controlling what kids play with the parents "where it ought to be," as opposed to with the videogames industry itself.

Although we've had our issues with the ESA and its adamance that age rating law is unconstitutional, it's good to see important trade bodies in America supporting parental control, helping ease the pressure of responsibility on developers whose games are blamed for having a corrupting influence on children. The ESA's actions to block the violent videogame legislation in America has inadvertently created the impression that the games industry is making so much money selling violent games to kids that such a law would be disastrous for the industry. This was never the body's intention and it certainly hasn't been good for the industry's image. As the ESA is geared toward protecting retailers, developers and publishers rather than protecting the public, though, it is bound to favour action that places more responsibility with parents as opposed to with the creators of games with questionable content.

Along with the announcement that the 360, Revolution and PS3 will all feature full parental control comes the launch of a new ELSPA website aimed at educating parents about the games their children play, which can be found at askaboutgames.com. Roger Bennet, director general of ELSPA, is confident that it will ease parents' minds. "We believe that through the [website] parents will see that the games industry is as well regulated as all other entertainment mediums," he says in a statement following the site's launch. "Armed with the facts on game ratings, parents will be able to buy games for their children for Christmas and throughout the year with the assurance that their children are not being exposed to content unsuitable for their age."



"IT PUTS THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONTROLLING WHAT KIDS PLAY WITH THE PARENTS AS OPPOSED TO WITH THE INDUSTRY ITSELF"

DISC-GO FEVER

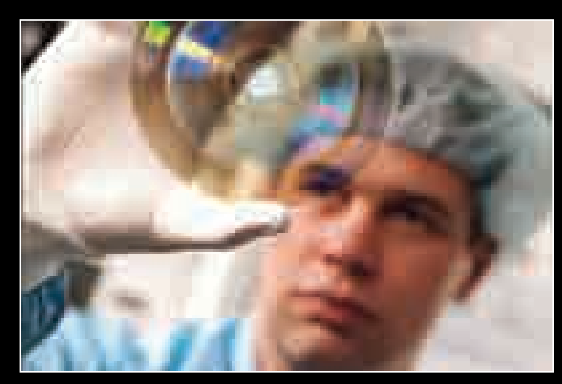
CHINESE ENTER THE NEXT-GEN DVD RACE

International DVD standard authority, the DVD Forum, has given Chinese engineers the go-ahead to look into the development of a next-generation DVD format which will compete with Sony's Blu-Ray and Toshiba's HD-DVD.

Last month, China announced plans to develop its own format, in order to eliminate the need to pay licensing fees to foreign companies. The format – due for release in 2007 – will be based on, but not compatible with, HD-DVD technology.

Lu Da, of the government-backed National Disc Engineering Centre, has said that the new format will offer higher definition, better sound quality and something very important to Chinese businesses – a more effective means of battling piracy than Blu-Ray and HD-DVD.

With three competing formats all vying for consumers' attentions within the next two years, it's fairly difficult to see how the market will be able to support them all. At least one will undoubtedly go down the same route as Betamax and, more recently, the MiniDisc, but at this early stage who's to say which?



Sony's Blu-Ray technology is already being declared the winner in some industry circles.

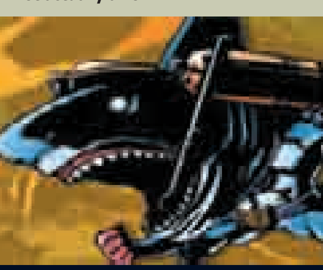
games™ THE TOP FIVE

VIDEO GAME FISH



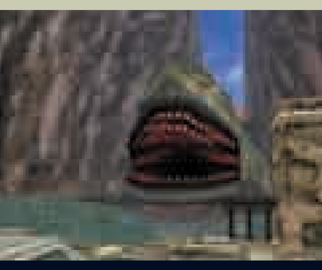
No.5 ECCO THE DOLPHIN

Not actually a fish.



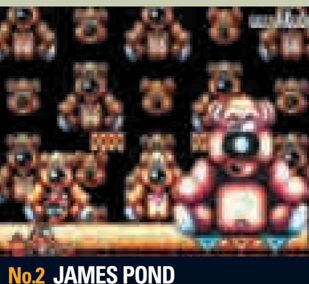
No.4 GRAN BRUCE

Greatest voice in existence.



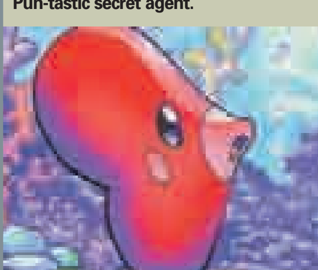
No.3 JABU-JABU

Famously annoying interior.



No.2 JAMES POND

Pun-tastic secret agent.



No.1 LUVDISC

Enough love for everyone.

GAMES ROOM 101



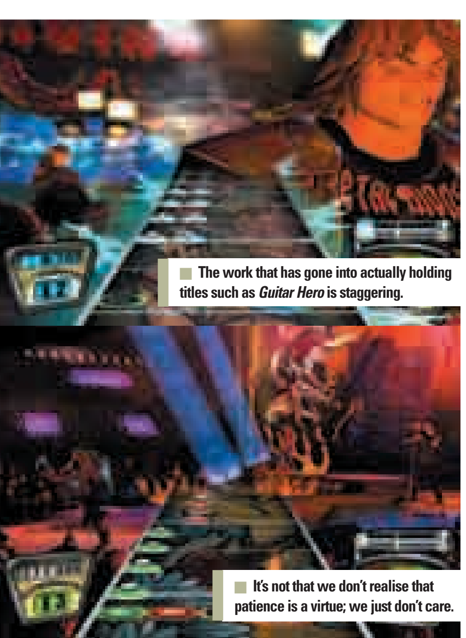
THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF VIDEOGAMES

NO. 40: THE KNOWLEDGE

Ignorance is bliss. Whether you work deep within the games industry itself, or merely gaze at it from the relative safety of 'outside' courtesy of the internet, you soon find yourself learning of things that you wish you hadn't.

Our example? *Guitar Hero*. Thanks equally to keenness and obligation, we knew about this ages ago. We waited patiently for it to arrive on our shores, only to find that it wasn't going to. That's right, despite wonder company RedOctane opting to publish the title in the US, no one's interested over here just yet, leaving us a sorry, guitar peripheral-craving mess.

Hang on though… we live in modern times. Hallelujah we cry, for we are no longer limited to the titles that are available in our fair territory. We can just import the blessed thing and commence smiling again, hurrah. Oh no, wait… we can't. Thanks to a horribly broken internet that won't accept any credit card on earth, and bastard customs folk who seem to fear large, pretend guitars, we are still left wanting. Sure, we've reviewed it. Yeah, we have ONE copy. But there are loads of us that still need it and the multiplayer game is yet to be sampled by most. It's been such a long time now; we simply wish we'd never found out about it.



The work that has gone into actually holding titles such as *Guitar Hero* is staggering.

It's not that we don't realise that patience is a virtue; we just don't care.



BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



STEAM ROOM

Warren Spector, ex-Ion Storm head, is set to develop a title based on Valve's Source Engine with his new studio, Junction Point. The new game will be distributed over the Steam Digital Distribution System. Junction isn't the first major developer to sign up for Steam however; don't forget that Ritual Entertainment's *SiN Episodes* is on the way. Before this, only Valve's products, third-party mods and small indie titles made use of the system. However, with the influx of larger studios using Steam, will we be seeing more electronic videogame distribution?





REAL DRIVIN'

The word 'advergame' conjures up horrific memories of *Pepsiman* on the PlayStation, so it's with some caution that we approach Climax's new title. The UK developer has joined forces with Swedish car manufacturers Volvo to produce *Volvo Drive* – a game that focuses on safe driving. A bit like *Burnout*. By far the most exciting aspect of the game so far is the thrilling 'moose avoidance test' – crucial for Volvo-ing around Canada in poor visibility. It sounds crushingly awful at this stage but is very likely the beginning of a new trend for marketing men. Is this mainstream gaming? We certainly hope not.





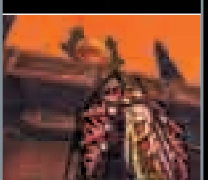
WORLD OF WORRY?

INTERNET TO BLAME FOR THE DEMISE OF CHINA'S YOUTH?

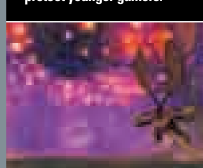
We're sure you know the feeling. It's three o'clock in the morning, the wife's been tucked up in bed for hours and you're tired. Dog tired. But that isn't going to stop you, for there is a cretin on the other end of cyberspace who disagrees with you on some trite issue and you must persist in arguing with them until your hands start to break (from all the typing – arguing on its own does not cause one's hands to disintegrate).

Why do we do it? Well, the Chinese think that they have the answer. According to the China Youth Association for Network Development (CYAND), 13 per cent of China's youths and young adults are addicted to using the internet. Sadly, the survey does not define what constitutes an internet 'addict', but given the fact that we know many people who spend more time online than off, we're assuming that it's quite a large number of hours per week.

This story has unfortunately coincided with reports that Blizzard's MMO *World Of Warcraft* has been blamed for the death of a 13-year-old Chinese boy. The parents of the youngster, who jumped to his death while apparently trying to re-enact a scene from the game, are suing Blizzard, claiming that their son's addiction to the game is the cause of his untimely demise. Well-known internet addiction activist Zhang Chunliang, who says he has talked to more than 60 parents whose children have become addicted to online gaming, is backing their claims.



■ Blizzard has recently installed parental controls in *World Of Warcraft* to protect younger gamers.



Given that there are more than 1.5 million *World Of Warcraft* players in China – more than a third of the game's worldwide subscriber base – together with the information found by the CYAND's survey, there certainly does seem to be a problem in China when it comes to the net. As with everything, use in moderation is fine, but overuse and abuse is dangerous.

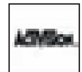
We would not be surprised to hear of internet addiction centres appearing all over the world in the next few years. As an alternate reality, MMOs, chat rooms and forums allow users to create a persona unique to cyberspace, and it's often a more enjoyable existence than the real world. It's when the online persona begins to consume the real one that problems occur.

It will be very interesting to see how far this story runs in the coming months – and even years. Let's just hope it doesn't involve another death, whether the internet is to blame or not.

"IT'S WHEN THE **ONLINE PERSONA** CONSUMES THE **REAL ONE** THAT **PROBLEMS** OCCUR"

Data Stream

BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



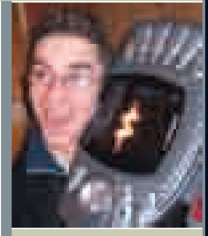
SPIDEY SENSE

Activision has secured the lucrative *Spider-Man* licence for a further 12 years, meaning the firm will publish titles based on the web-slinger until 2018. It's fantastic news for Activision – the previous two *Spidey* games both topped the charts, and the licence is a secure source of income for the publisher. Hopefully, the games can return to the free-swinging joy of *Spider-Man 2*, forgetting the blemish that was *Ultimate Spider-Man*. The game based on the third movie is due out next summer; it'll be interesting to see which direction the series takes.



FIRM BUT FAIR

In its quest to improve the PSP, Sony has released version 2.60 of the PlayStation Portable firmware – again expanding the console's functionality. The main features of this update are the inclusion of WMA audio playback and RSS feed reading. This will be a welcome addition for anyone who uses Windows Media Player to rip and store music files, but PSP users who enjoy the homebrew aspect of the console will be disappointed by 2.60's increased security. Even though the 2.5 firmware has not yet been cracked, 2.60 removes the functionality of downgrade programs, so that toying with the PSP is a tougher prospect.



The N-Gage will continue to be supported – it's the actual handsets that are being abandoned…

NOKIA INCHES CLOSER TO ABANDONING THE N-GAGE

N-EVITABLE

In a statement this month, mobile communications giant Nokia announced that it had no intention of further developing N-Gage models and was instead to focus upon integrating gaming technology into its newer mobile phones. Support for the N-Gage and N-Gage QD, however, has not been dropped, and the device's online and customer service support will remain active, at least in the near future.

Antti Vasara, Nokia's vice president of corporate strategy, confirmed the news in a statement assuring the N-Gage-owning public that the machine would enjoy continued support. "N-Gage is still being sold but it was not a success in the sense of developing a new [market] category," he admitted. "We have learned that people want to play games on all devices. As such we are integrating the gaming software into Series 60 phones." Vasara also asserted that Nokia would be putting a greater emphasis on gaming from 2007 onwards, by which time technology should be advanced and cheap enough to make it a plausible idea.

It's good to see that Nokia has learned a lesson from the N-Gage's lack of success and will concentrate on better integrating gaming technology into its phones in the future – unlike certain other manufacturers of redundant handheld devices, which continue to assert success despite their painfully apparent failure…





The DS's Wi-Fi Connection service is going down a storm.



NINTENDO CLAIMS HUGE DS WI-FI SUCCESS

WI-FI WOW

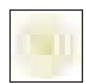
Despite announcing a 21 per cent fall in profits compared to this time last year as the GameCube's profitability continues to tail off, Nintendo has recently revealed that its DS handheld has enjoyed considerable success. The company announced that over one million copies of *Nintendogs* were sold in Europe in the two months since its launch on 7 October 2005. Over 100,000 DS units have been sold each week since the launch and the console's steady success continues unabated despite the release of the PSP which the British public seems to find altogether more desirable. And most importantly, the DS's online Wi-Fi capabilities have proved hugely popular with the release of *Mario Kart* DS last month.

45 per cent of the 112,000 individuals who bought Mario's racing game in the first week of release in America have already logged into Nintendo's Wi-Fi service, the firm claims. That's a huge uptake considering that the DS is one of the very first online handheld gaming devices and that *Mario Kart* is the first online game for the system. Compared to Microsoft's Xbox Live service, for instance, to which approximately ten per cent of Xbox owners subscribe, it's an incredibly high early uptake. No figures have yet been revealed for the DS's other online games, *Animal Crossing* and *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*, but the 45 per cent figure is incredibly encouraging nonetheless.

> "**45 PER CENT** OF THE 112,000 **AMERICANS** WHO BOUGHT **MARIO KART** IN ITS FIRST WEEK OF RELEASE HAVE **ALREADY LOGGED ON** TO THE WI-FI SERVICE"

Data stream

BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



CRASH AND BURN

Microsoft has been quick to respond to claims that Xbox 360s have been crashing and freezing due to overheating. The Xbox 360's PSU, which can reach extremely high temperatures due to the machine's power, is the apparent reason for the problem. Customers who have suffered issues with their machines are apparently storing the (rather large) PSU out of sight, therefore not allowing it the space to ventilate. Just as a PC will shut down if there is a risk of fire, so will a 360. However, games™ will stay on the case, should problems continue to occur.



ROGER BENNETT **STEPS DOWN** AS HEAD OF ELSPA



After 16 years at the top, Bennett remains a respected member of the industry.

THE END OF THE LINE

As of July 2006, long-serving ELSPA director Roger Bennett will step down from his post, ending a 16-year run as the head of the UK's videogames publishing trade body. Bennett is a familiar face to many in the industry, and in recent years he took an increasingly active role in standing up for us in the media. Indeed, without Bennett there would be no voluntary age rating system on game boxes, no UK leisure software charts and no annual industry report.

ELSPA board chairman Andy Payne has described Bennett's decision to retire as, "The end of an era." He adds that, "Roger has been an exceptionally loyal servant to the industry and he will be missed. I think all who have worked with Roger will wish him the very best and I am sure he will be ready to take up a new challenge within the industry as his skills, contacts and vast experience are second to none."

Bennett will, indeed, be missed – as the voice for an industry muzzled by dismissal, he was an invaluable asset and a friendly face to boot. Bye Roger… we'll miss you.

"I AM SURE HE'LL BE READY TO TAKE UP A NEW CHALLENGE"

ANDY PAYNE , ELSPA





Fils-Aime should have no trouble shouting about his new product.

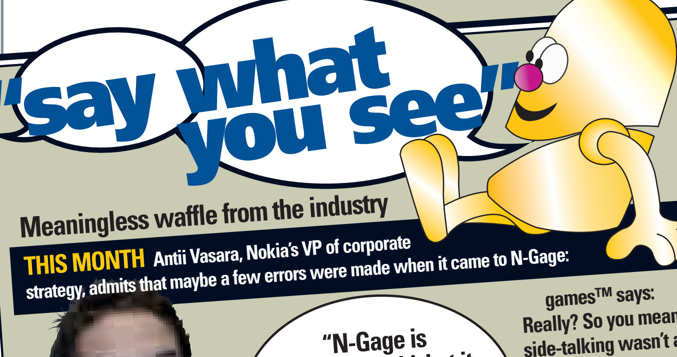
THAT'S N-TERTAINMENT

FILS-AIME **CRANKS UP** THE NINTENDO **RUMOUR MILL**

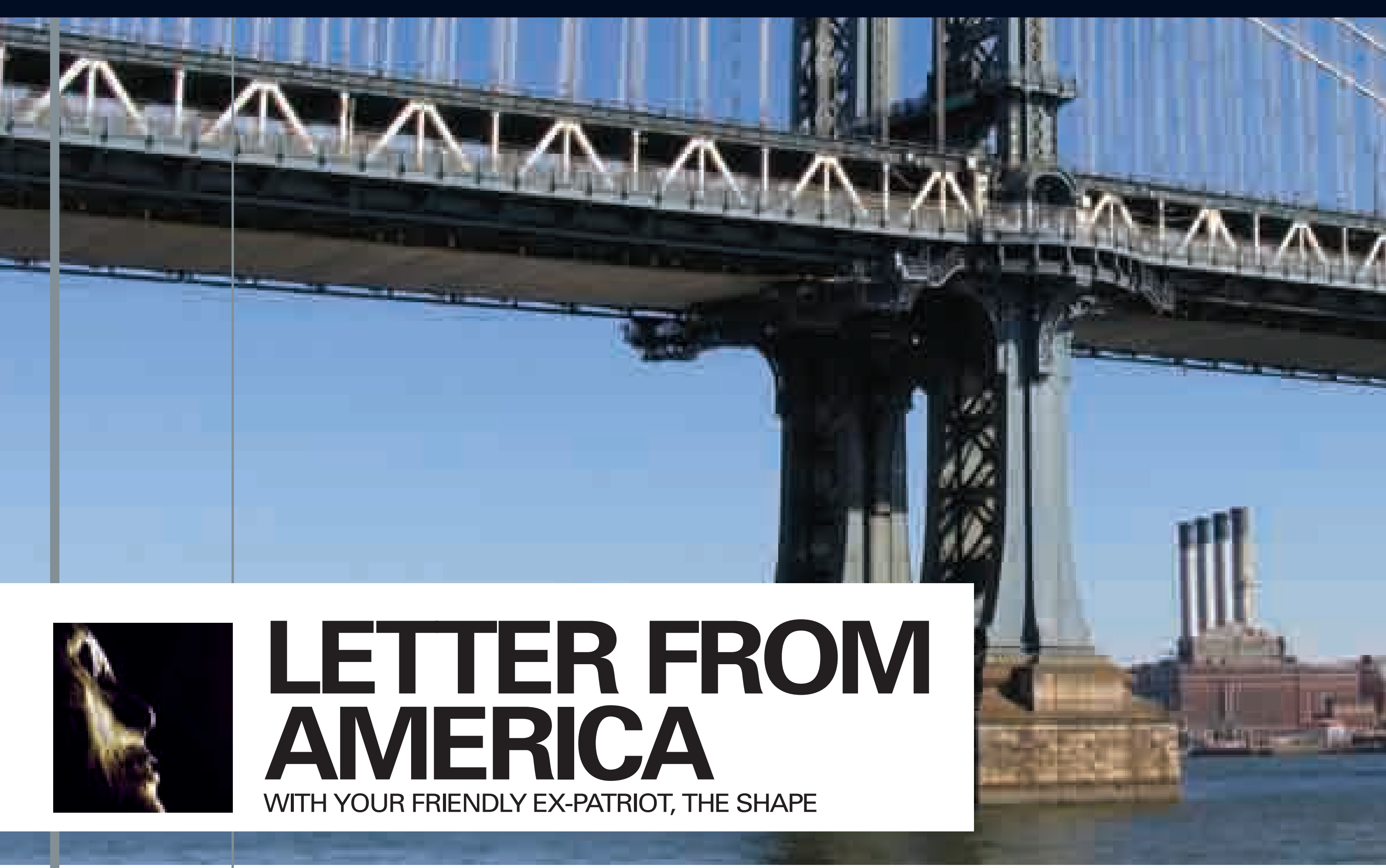
It's started already. Over the coming months, you can expect a steady stream of Revolution rumours and Nintendo news to flood every available media outlet. Nintendo of America's executive vice president of sales and marketing Reggie Fils-Aime is already doing his level best to kick-start the hype machine.

Speaking to *CNN Money*, Fils-Aime stated that, "Value has been a key card for us this generation, and we'll continue to play it. Do I expect us to be at a lower price point than our competition? Yes, I do. Have we determined a price yet? No, we haven't."

So we can expect more bang for our buck with Nintendo, but have past mistakes taught the firm anything as we approach the next gen? "We've got to make sure that the titles in the first six months are strong and can drive sales. We've also got to deliver on the right consumer needs." Sounds like Nintendo may have been listening after all.




eMag



LETTER FROM AMERICA

WITH YOUR FRIENDLY EX-PATRIOT, THE SHAPE

This man wants your Xbox 360 – for nothing. Are you going to give it to him? Well… are you?

"IT WAS COMFORTING TO COME THROUGH THIS BUNGLED LAUNCH REMAINING, THEN WATCH IT HAPPEN AGAIN TEN DAYS LATER

It would appear that I misjudged the domestic launch of Xbox 360 by a small margin. At least, if you consider, say, the Louisiana purchase to be 'small' which, for the purposes of this article, I do. What I predicted: rumours of a shortage would evaporate on launch as the substanceless mist of calculated stealth marketing combined with BS from nobodies whose sister's boyfriend worked in EB Games one summer and still knows two guys behind the counter. What actually happened: pretty much the worst parts of the bible.

It was comforting to come through this bungled launch with a wisp of lucid thought remaining, then watch it happen again ten days later on your side of the world. Like watching Tony Jaa batter someone stupid in real-time (where it's almost too quick to take in), followed by the slo-mo re-run of the same sequence from three other camera angles, allowing you to better grasp what occurred. Following is a compendium of the events preceding, during and after launch as we experienced them as consumers in the States; follow along and draw comparisons with your own sorry story.

Saturday 19 November, a few days before the big occasion, I noticed a commotion from EBX at the mall. It had begun selling 360 games ahead of the machine; *NFS Most Wanted*, *PGR3*, *Condemned*, *Call Of Duty 2*, some American sports games. Recalling the *GoldenEye* drought of the N64's days, I queued to buy a copy of *Perfect Dark* in case they became thin on the ground post-launch. In line ahead of me was a man being told that, although he'd pre-ordered his 360 in June, allocations had been slashed by Microsoft and his name was beyond the first batch. They didn't know when more were coming. This, I later learned, had happened across the country. GameStops and EBs – the stores accepting pre-orders for seven or eight months – had expected around 50 machines but were given more like 10 or 12. There was going to be a problem.

Stay away from the big electronics stores, I thought, and the games stores. A visit to Toys R Us yielded promising info: it said that there were no special midnight opening plans and that it would be business as usual: 9am opening, first come first served. Nobody thinks of Toys R Us for videogames. That was my safety store, my fallback, my sleeper in the parlance of the 360-hunting community at xbox.com.

Any notion I had of a phony shortage was eroded on the 21st, when I called the local Walmart. "We only got eight," they said, "and there are more than eight people in line already." This was 3pm the day before launch and Walmart's special 12.01am opening. We took a ride up to the plaza nearer the time, and sure enough found people waiting outside, but also at other stores that weren't due to open until the morning. It was bitterly



WITH A WISP OF LUCID THOUGHT ON YOUR SIDE OF THE WORLD"

cold in the north east that night, and raining heavily. I am not waiting outside for nine hours on a winter's night to buy electronics.

Mrs Shape, bless her, sneaked out at 7am in search of a Premium on launch day, but everywhere was sold out before 9am. Even our 'business as usual' Toys R Us was empty by then; it had secretly opened at six. The area was dry. The nation was dry. And so it continued. Stories surfaced of 360s taken at gunpoint and soon even at people's driveways, like Patsy Springer of Jonesboro Georgia, who was followed home from the store after queuing for nine hours.

On 26 November, unofficial Microsoft mouthpiece Major Nelson announced that there'd be weekly shipments. There were not. Two days later MS marketing puppet John Porcaro said that the second wave would reach retail that weekend. Entirely false. eBay went gouge crazy, though half the auctions were fakes to buoy average prices. The stores told us January and March. Microsoft still insisted shipments were hours away. They never came. At the time of writing, there's been no second shipment anywhere in the US. Given the anemic supply that dribbled out for launch, the majority of customers are still waiting. And that's how Microsoft stole Christmas.

Many thanks



MISS ABOUT BRITAIN…

Sugababes



LOVE ABOUT AMERICA…

Latkes



GOT ANY QUESTIONS FOR THE SHAPE? THEN JUST DROP HIM A LINE AT: theshape@comcast.net YOU MIGHT GET A REPLY… OR POSSIBLY JUST THE FINGER.

AMERIKAAN

PRODUCTS, PLACES, SERVICES AND EVENTS FROM THE LAND OF THE FREE

BEST BUY

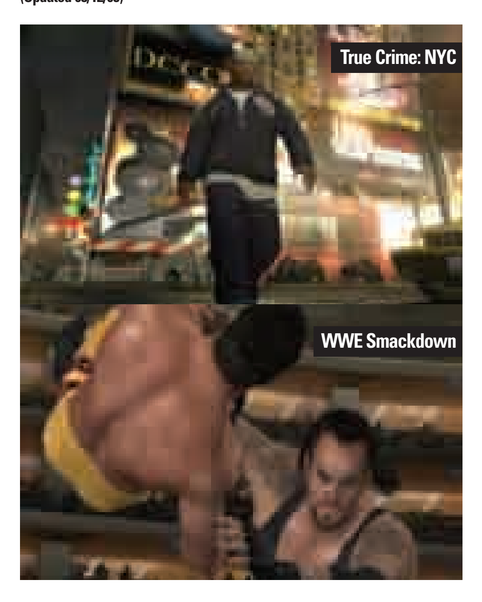


Microsoft's selected 'launch partner' for Xbox 360 was electronics chain Best Buy. Situated out of town, it can afford to be spacious. Inside it's like a Dixons the size of an aircraft hangar, except everything's yellow and blue. Its partner status netted it by far the largest chunk of the 360's first shipment. Bastards.

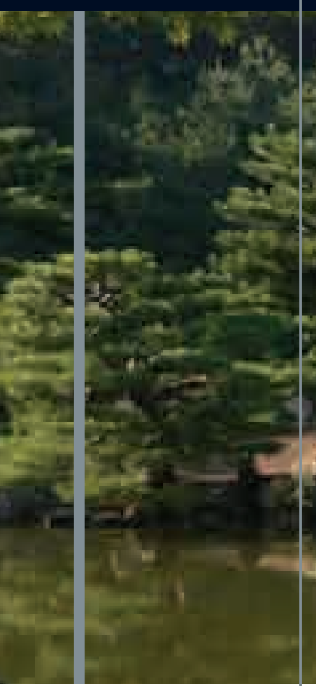
US MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	True Crime: New York City	Activision	PS2
2	GUN	Activision	PS2
3	WWE Smackdown! Vs RAW 2006	THQ	PS2
4	GUN	Activision	Xbox
5	True Crime: New York City	Activision	Xbox
6	Call Of Duty 2: Big Red One	Activison	Xbox
7	Peter Jackson's King Kong	Ubisoft	PS2
8	Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	Activision	Xbox
9	Madden NFL 06	EA Sports	PS2
10	50 Cent: Bulletproof	Vivendi	PS2

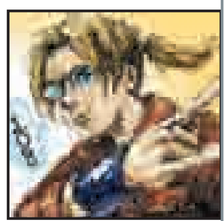
(Updated 08/12/05)


True Crime: NYC

WWE Smackdown







KONGETSU*

WITH JAPANESE CORRESPONDENT TIM ROGERS

"POUND THE LIVING HELL OUT OF THAT RED BUTTON, AND YOUR TWITCH THE BIG HORN-LIKE ANTENNA ON ITS HEAD IN THE



Dryly put, *Mushi King* – which means 'insect king', even though the game only lets you control beetles, and not a variety of insects – is an arcade game contained in a three-foot high cabinet. Even pre-schoolers have to hunch over a little bit to play it. The game is bright; it's by Sega, and it looks like a Dreamcast game. To play, you spend ¥500 on a membership card which you stick in the machine. You then have to put in another ¥100 to begin playing. There are three buttons in front of the screen – red, yellow and blue – though I'll pretend that there's only one, and it's red: when an on-screen cue comes up, you pound the living hell out of that red button, and watch your lazy little on-screen beetle twitch the big horn-like antenna on the front of its head in the direction of another beetle. A winner is soon decided which I guess is always the player. When one round is over, you need to insert 100 more yen to play another. Your beetles grow and get stronger, meaning that they do more 'damage'. The data is stored on your card, and you can get many cards for many beetles.

Enter a suburban Japanese grocery store on a Sunday afternoon and you'll see young parents, arms folded, standing back as their children pound on the red button. When their round is done, they take their card and get to the end of the line. The parents never read books or magazines, and they never look at each other. They just kind of stand there slack-faced, like the Japanese office workers that they are the rest of the week. The kids sometimes let out squeals, though usually they're stoic and silent. All you hear is the sound of the pounding of 'that' button. On the way home, after Daddy and Mommy have bought their adult things like bread and eggs, the kid relates stories of valour, which usually amount to, "Oh yeah, I totally slammed that button a hundred times, did you see that?"

Needless to say, this is the game that's keeping Sega alive. The Game Boy Advance version, which actually supports a two-player Battle mode (unlike the arcade version), was responsible for the GBA outselling the DS and the PSP this summer. The two-player battles basically amount to a contest of whoever has historically pressed the 'A' button the most.

Just last month, Taito, one of the biggest members of Japan's arcade scene, released a game called *Kyoryuu King*, with kyoryuu meaning 'dinosaur'. I, and many other reasonable people of near-genius intelligence, thought this was a genuine sequel to *Mushi King*, aimed at the wallets of parents worldwide – and it made sense to think this. When I pointed at *Mushi King* long ago and asked a random Japanese person, "Why is this game popular?" I got the response, "Because everyone loves beetles." "Not me! I hate



TEACH YOURSELF JAPANESE

LESSON 40:	CONVERSATIONS IN SEGA
Oioi, doko no kumi no yakuza, temee?	Hey! Whose yakuza do you belong to, buddy?
Orea dare no yakuza de mo neeze.	I ain't nobody's yakuza.
Usotsuke konoyarou!	You lying bastard!
Funanori wo sagashiteimasu ga…	I'm looking for sailors.
Ou, honma. Honma, koitsu wa funanori sagashiterutte.	Oh, you don't say. Boys, look at this; guy says he's looking for sailors!
Soudesu. Shitteru ka shitteinai ka?	Yes. So, do you know, or don't you?
Shitteru kana. Baiku baa de itsumo nonderun janaika?	Let me see… don't they usually hang out in biker bars?

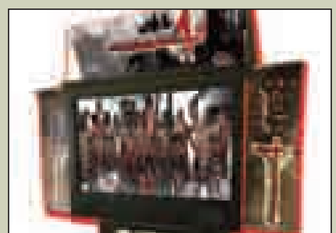
LITTLE ON-SCREEN BEETLE WILL DIRECTION OF THE OTHER ONE”

the thought of the filthy, shiny, leathery things!” I replied. In Japan, though, it's true: people will buy damned DVDs of beetles fighting. Weird. Anyway, ‘*Dino King*’ seemed plausible as a *Mushi King* sequel. It turns out it wasn't, even though the cabinet looked pretty much exactly the same. Sega threatened a lawsuit and Taito's little game disappeared in the blink of an eye – a year of R&D down the tubes.

It reminds me of the *Fighter's History* debacle back in 1993. Capcom sued Data East for making fighting characters that looked like *Street Fighter*'s Ryu and Ken. Anyone remember that? Once Capcom made its Bruce Lee look-alike Fei Long in *Super Street Fighter II*, well, I suppose that's where the modern age of gaming began. And then there was *Mushi King*. Thus ends the parable.

Kind regards

Tim Rogers



THOSE INNOVATIVE JAPANESE

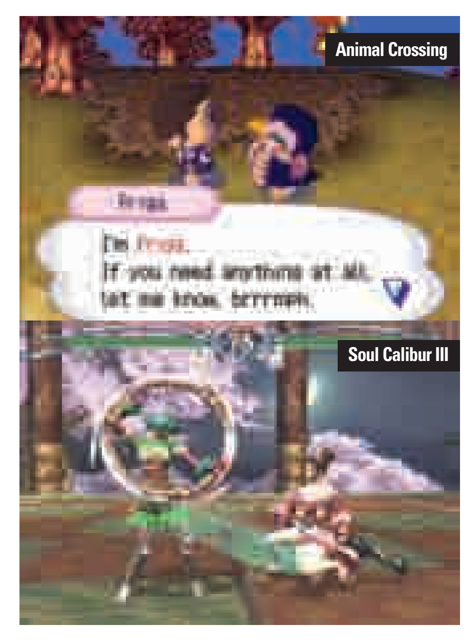
I remember seeing the *Sonic The Hedgehog* DS demo at E3 2004. Man, that was horrible. All you did in that game was scratch the living hell out of the bottom screen, and a Sonic on the top screen started running faster. There was a little label that said, “This is a work in progress.” How much further can you take a scratch-the-hell-out-of-the-screen game mechanic? *Mushi King* takes it pretty far, and has been morbidly successful for it.

I recently saw a location test of *House Of The Dead 4,* and though it's yet another game about shooting zombies, and though there's actually been a videogame based on it, it didn't fail to impress. The gun is an Uzi. I was able to pick it up and feel its weight (not too heavy) between the paying gamers' rounds. The game is about shooting zombies. That's not the important part – sometimes, a prompt will show up, telling you to shake the gun. Shake the gun. Isn't that great? Shake it really hard to break free of dizziness. I can imagine this working on the Revolution. I'm not being sarcastic; I think it's really lovely. You can hear that plastic rattling when the gun fires and everything. Makes me think of the Revolution as a way to bring all those pick-up-and-playable amusement park-like ‘attraction’ games home for good.

JAPANESE MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	Animal Crossing: Wild World	Nintendo	DS
2	Naruto 4	Bandai	GC
3	RockMan Battle Network: Grega	Capcom	GBA
4	Soul Calibur III	Namco	PS2
5	Ratchet: Deadlocked	Sony	PS2
6	RockMan Battle Nework: Faltzer	Capcom	GBA
7	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Red	Nintendo	GBA
8	Ikusagami	Genki	PS2
9	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Blue	Nintendo	GBA
10	Gundam: Federation Vs Z.A.F.T.	Bandai	PS2

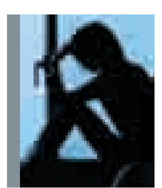
(Week ending 27/11/05)


Animal Crossing
Soul Calibur III



THE PEOPLE IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY TELL IT LIKE IT IS…

GIMME A D, GIMME AN R…



Contrary to what some may think, I really enjoy playing videogames! So, I'm going to forsake criticising, this month, in favour of exploiting this column to talk about my latest love.

There are but a handful of games that I would champion until my dying day, but this is one such title; it's called *Deadly Rooms Of Death* and can be found at http://www.drod.net.

First glances at *DROD* would suggest a game trying to emulate the gameplay and appearance of the 2D *Zelda* dungeons. As in *Zelda, DROD* will have you flicking switches to open barriers, and killing enemies with your sword; *DROD* plays slightly differently though. For one thing the game requires no quick reactions whatsoever. You move from one tile to the next using directional keys. After you've moved, your adversaries move according to their behavioural rules. If you don't move then the game is static.

DROD is also played in one enormous dungeon. Each floor consists of numerous rooms and each room is its own challenge. Once a room is deemed complete, its status remains complete forever.

This gameplay structure makes the game distressingly easy to hide behind your email window whenever your boss walks past, without worrying that pesky things like work are going to harm your progress. Things start off gently, although by the fifth floor you'll spend up to ten minutes solving a room. By the eleventh, you'll be up to an hour. And that's if you're lucky.

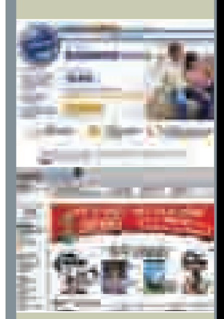
Every gameplay element is very simple, but the game's greatness comes from its sublimely meticulous design resulting in conundrums that leave *Zelda*'s in the dust. That's a big claim and one I sincerely hope you decide to investigate.

Mr X – putting the love back into shareware, one game at a time.

FROM THE FRONT

BLOCKBUSTER TO SELL OFF GAMESTATION, NINTENDO REPORTS LOSSES, AND ANOTHER US STUDIO CLOSES…

RENTAL GIANT LOOKS TO SELL OFF GAMING



With Blockbuster Online taking off, it's not surprising that the chain is looking to dump non-rental assets.

RETAIL MANIA

Following its purchase of Gamestation in 2003, the Blockbuster corporation looks set to sell its successful videogame retail chain in the near future. The rental chain suffered enormous operating losses of $491.4 million in the third quarter of this year and, consequently, is looking to sell off superfluous business interests. Industry magazine *MCV* has reported that Gamestation would be a very likely candidate for sale as the corporation tries to siphon off its excess costs.

Blockbuster has not yet mentioned Gamestation by name, but it did issue a statement asserting that, "Blockbuster is focused on two things: growing its share of store-based rental business and growing Blockbuster Online. The company is exploring its options in regards to… non-Blockbuster branded assets." Naturally, this has lead analysts to predict the sale of Rhino Games, Gamestation and Game Rush, three non-essential Blockbuster operations. The corporation has yet to comment specifically on the 200-store-strong UK games retail chain, although it has remarked that, "We believe Gamestation will benefit from the growth of new hardware platforms."

This news comes after the merger of rival US retail chains EB and Gamestop, which represented a huge consolidation in the US specialist retail market. Were Gamestation to be put up for sale, a similar consolidation would likely occur in the UK – it's very likely that rival chain Game would buy it up, thereby reducing its competition. Considering Game's already-dominant position in the marketplace, that could spell disaster for the British market. With less competition, a merged Game/Gamestation specialist retail giant would be free to increase prices we.

Recently however, we've seen Game's profits drop due to the increasing popularity of online retailers such as play.com, which have the advantage of lower prices and centralised stock. For potential bidders, the Gamestation online store would, therefore, be as valuable an acquisition as its retail chains.

Unfortunately, at time of press neither Gamestation nor Blockbuster was willing to comment on a possible sale.

GOTTA DROP 'EM ALL

NINTENDO'S HALF-YEAR REPORT SHOWS FALLING PROFITS

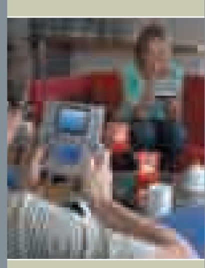


Profits are down, but at least *Nintendogs* is popular.

Despite the recent success of the DS, Nintendo's half-year report indicated a 21 per cent drop in profits this month. Operating profit was down by 51 per cent, while net income and sales were also down on last year. However, the firm remains healthily profitable with a $308.4 million net profit after expenses.

The drop can be attributed to the Cube's deterioration in profitability over the past year, not to mention the R&D costs for the new Revolution. In North America, sales of Cube software and hardware were down, although handhelds have been doing better with over 100,000 DS units shipping per week in Europe.

Nintendo lowered its predictions for the number of Cube and DS units to ship by the end of the year to reflect the fall in profits, but raised its GBA estimates. It didn't however, alter total operating and net profit estimates for the financial year, which remain at $758 million and $631 million respectively. Total sales for the year are estimated at $3.4 billion.



Nintendo's wireless service is also performing well with players of *Mario Kart* and *Animal Crossing*.



"WITH ITS PARENT COMPANY HAVING MONEY TROUBLE, GAME STATION COULD BE SOLD OFF VERY SOON…"

UK MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	Need For Speed: Most Wanted	EA Games	Multi
2	Pro Evolution Soccer 5	Konami	Multi
3	FIFA '06	EA Sports	Multi
4	Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire	EA Games	Multi
5	50 Cent: Bulletproof	Vivendi	Multi
6	Call Of Duty 2: Big Red One	Activision	Multi
7	Star Wars Battlefront II	Activision	Multi
8	Peter Jackson's King Kong	Ubisoft	Multi
9	GTA: Liberty City Stories	Rockstar	PSP
10	WWE Smackdown! Vs RAW 2006	THQ	PS2

You can tell it's Christmas – the chart's packed with some rather dubious things. Still, at least there are also some nice titles too with *Liberty City Stories, Star Wars Battlefront II* and *Pro Evolution Soccer 5* all propping up the other less desirable games.

All information is compiled by ChartTrack and is the strict copyright of Elspa (UK) Ltd. UK Entertainment Software Sales Charts (Full Price, All Formats) (w/e 3 December 2005)


NFS: Most Wanted

Pro Evolution Soccer 5

50 Cent: Bulletproof

ROSE AND FELL

STAINLESS STEEL STUDIOS CLOSES DOWN

Yet another small PC developer folded this month, this time it's Stainless Steel Studios, the creator of *Empire Earth*. The American developer announced mass redundancies and seems to have ceased all operations just weeks before its latest *Rise And Fall* title was due to go gold. Stainless Steel was a PC RTS development studio based in Massachusetts, set up by former lead designer on *Age Of Empires*, Rick Goodman.

Full details of the circumstances surrounding the studio's closure aren't yet known; however, the news broke as a poster on the *Rise And Fall* community website claimed that he was a former employee who had been laid off as the studio ceased operations. His story has since apparently been confirmed by several other persons posting on the forums, one of whom asserted that, "This is true – Stainless Steel is no more." The company website has been taken offline but, as yet, no official confirmation has been issued.

Midway, which was due to publish *Rise And Fall: Civilizations At War*, has issued no statement regarding the closure. It seems odd, though, that a title so near to completion would remain forever in limbo, and may well still somehow be released.

RELEASE LISTS



Rogue Galaxy: PS2 It's a pirate's life for me…

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter: Multi It's all about the tactics.

Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble: Multi Why does Capcom keep doing this? WHY?



MOST PLAYED

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Microsoft

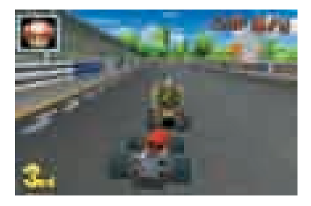
We're love racing games this month and are addicted to Microsoft's lovely launch title. Obsessive medal chasing, shaving milliseconds off lap times and unlocking prettier, shinier cars have been our three chief concerns over the past four weeks – and now Live's back on too. Yay indeed.



MARIO KART DS

Format: Nintendo DS
Publisher: Nintendo

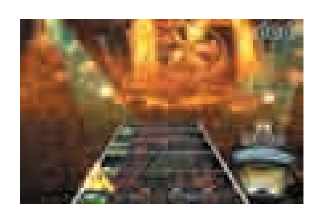
Long coach journeys to London are never fun – which is where *Mario Kart DS* really showed its strength for us as we spent upwards of three hours on the road, desperately screeching round the tightest corners in the multiplayer mode of Nintendo's flagship DS racer.



(NOT) GUITAR HERO

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Red Octane

We HATE the internet. Having ordered our personal copies months in advance and spent a week gazing sadly at pictures of the controller, humming *More Than A Feeling* to ourselves in a melancholy fashion, the people we ordered it from said we weren't allowed to have it. We have to wait two to six weeks. NOT cool.



PLAYSTATION2

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
27 January	We Love Katamari	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Gene Troopers	Playlogic	
FEBRUARY '06			
3 February	Urban Reign	Sony	
10 February	Dynasty Warriors 5: Xtreme Legends	Koei	
24 February	Black	Electronic Arts	Wanted
24 February	TOCA Race Driver 3	Codemasters	
TBC	Shadow Of The Colossus	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Dragon Quest VIII	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft	
TBC	Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	Atari	
MARCH '06			
3 February	FIFA Street 2	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Tales Of Legendia	Namco	
TBC	24: The Game	Sony	
TBC	Ape Escape 3	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Devil Kings	Capcom	
Q1 '06			
TBC	America's Army: Rise Of A Soldier	Ubisoft	
TBC	Driver: Parallel Lines	Atari	
TBC	Fear And Respect	Midway	
TBC	Commandos Strike Force	SCi	
TBC	The Godfather	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Bully	Rockstar	
TBC	Castlevania: Curse Of Darkness	Konami	
TBC	Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	THQ	
TBC	Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana	Koei	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Final Fantasy XII	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Okami	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Pro Evolution Soccer Management	Konami	
TBC	Kingdom Hearts 2	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Sonic Riders	Sega	
TBC	Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence	Konami	Wanted
TBC	Onimusha: Dawn Of Dreams	Capcom	Wanted



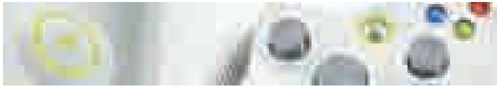
GAMECUBE

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
27 January	Mario Party 7	Nintendo	
FEBRUARY '06			
6 February	Chibi Robo	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Giftpia	Nintendo	
TBC	Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	Capcom	
MARCH '06			
3 March	FIFA Street 2	Electronic Arts	
31 March	Odama	Nintendo	
TBC	Harvest Moon: Magical Melody	Rising Star	
Q1 '06			
TBC	The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC 2006			
TBC	Chaos Field	TBC	



XBOX

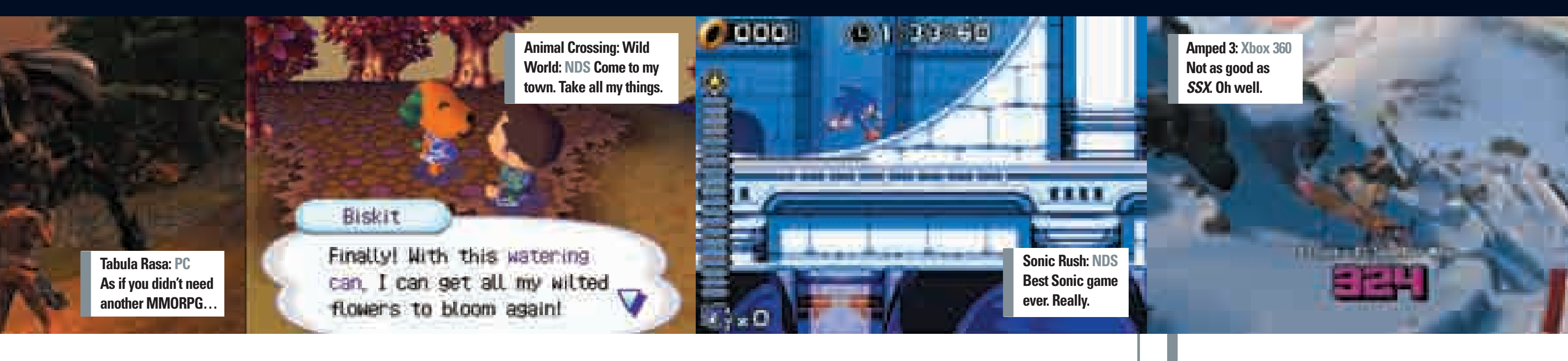
Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
27 January	NHL 2K6	Electronic Arts	
27 January	NFL 2K6	Electronic Arts	
FEBRUARY '06			
3 February	Pac-Man World 3	Outsource Media	
24 February	Black	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	Atari	
TBC	Stubbs The Zombie In 'Rebel Without A Pulse'	THQ	
TBC	TOCA Race Driver 3	Codemasters	
TBC	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft	
MARCH '06			
3 March	FIFA Street 2	Electronic Arts	
10 March	Painkiller: Hell Wars	DreamCatcher	Wanted
Q1 '06			
TBC	America's Army: Rise Of A Soldier	Ubisoft	
TBC	American McGee Presents: Bad Day LA	Enlight	Wanted
TBC	Fear And Respect	Midway	
TBC	Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend	SCi	
TBC	The Godfather	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Castlevania: Curse Of Darkness	Konami	
TBC	Commandos Strike Force	SCi	
TBC	Bully	Rockstar	
TBC	Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	THQ	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Final Fight Streetwise	Capcom	
TBC	Sensible Soccer	Kuju	
TBC	Driver: Parallel Lines	Atari	
TBC	Starcraft: Ghost	Blizzard	



XBOX 360

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
27 January	Ridge Racer 6	Electronic Arts	Wanted

CALM YOUR FEVERISH ANTICIPATION WITH OUR COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF FORTHCOMING RELEASES



Tabula Rasa: PC As if you didn't need another MMORPG…

Animal Crossing: Wild World: NDS Come to my town. Take all my things.

Sonic Rush: NDS Best Sonic game ever. Really.

Amped 3: Xbox 360 Not as good as *SSX*. Oh well.

FEBRUARY '06			
TBC	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft	
MARCH '06			
TBC	LMA Manager 2006	Codemasters	
Q1 '06			
TBC	CHROMEHOUNDS	Sega	
TBC	Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend	Eidos	
TBC	TimeShift	Atari	Wanted
TBC	Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 4	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC 2006			
TBC	Dead Rising	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Test Drive Unlimited	Atari	
TBC	Full Auto	Sega	
TBC	Final Fantasy XI	Sega	
TBC	Sonic The Hedgehog	Sega	Wanted
TBC	Too Human	Microsoft	
TBC	Gears Of War	Microsoft	
TBC	Prey	2K Games	



PC

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
TBC	TimeShift	Atari	Wanted
TBC	Dynasty Warriors 4	Koei	
FEBRUARY '06			
3 February	Pac-Man World 3	Electronic Arts	
7 February	Star Wars: Empire At War	LucasArts	
TBC	Crashday	Atari	
TBC	Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic	Ubisoft	
TBC	TOCA Race Driver 3	Codemasters	
TBC	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft	
TBC	Tycoon City: New York	Atari	
TBC	Stubbs The Zombie In 'Rebel Without A Pulse'	THQ	
MARCH '06			
3 March	FIFA Street 2	Electronic Arts	
17 March	War On Terror	Monte Cristo	
31 March	Uber Soldier	Deep Silver	
Q1 '06			
TBC	Commandos Strike Force	SCi	
TBC	Heroes Of Might And Magic V	Ubisoft	
TBC	Company Of Heroes	THQ	Wanted
TBC	American McGee Presents: Bad Day LA	Enlight	Wanted
TBC	Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle Earth II	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Auto Assault	NCsoft	Wanted
TBC	The Godfather	Electronic Arts	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Titan Quest	THQ	
TBC	Spellforce 2	Deep Silver	

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
TBC	Top Spin 2	2K Sports	
FEBRUARY '06			
17 February	Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	THQ	
MARCH '06			
31 March	Tales Of Phantasia	Namco	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Final Fantasy IV	Nintendo	Wanted

PLAYSTATION PORTABLE

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
TBC	Infected	Majesco	Wanted
FEBRUARY '06			
3 February	Pac-Man World 3	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Lemmings	Sony	
MARCH '06			
TBC	Dead To Rights: Reckoning	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Ape Escape P	Sony	
TBC	Key Of Heaven	Sony	
Q1 '06			
TBC	The Godfather	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Splinter Cell	Ubisoft	
TBC	Breath Of Fire III	Capcom	
TBC	Tales Of Eternia	Ubisoft	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Monster Hunter Freedom	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	Capcom	
TBC	Gran Turismo 4 Mobile	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Me & My Katamari	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Daxter	Sony	

NINTENDO DS

Month	Title	Publisher	
JANUARY '06			
9 January	Electroplankton	Nintendo	Wanted
27 January	Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Bust-A-Move DS	Digital Bros	
FEBRUARY '06			
27 February	Super Princess Peach	Nintendo	
TBC	Viewtiful Joe: Double Trouble	Capcom	
TBC	Metroid Prime Pinball	Nintendo	
MARCH '06			
10 March	Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	Capcom	Wanted
20 March	Metroid Prime: Hunters	Nintendo	
31 March	Animal Crossing: Wild World	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Trauma Center: Under The Knife	Atlus	Wanted
Q1 '06			
TBC	New Super Mario Bros.	Nintendo	
TBC	Harvest Moon	Rising Star	
TBC	Super Monkey Ball Touch & Roll	Sega	
TBC 2006			
TBC	Pokémon Diamond/Pearl	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Viewtiful Joe: Double Trouble	Capcom	

PLEASE NOTE: While every effort has been made to ensure these dates are correct at the time of going to press, they are liable to change at short notice. Which is completely beyond our control, so don't go giving us evils.



ROGUE GALAXY

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sony
It's so pretty. Playing *Dragon Quest VIII*, which just came out in America, only served to make us want *Rogue Galaxy* more. It was almost enough to make us play through *Dark Chronicle* again, but then we remembered how ridiculously complicated it was and started *Skies Of Arcadia Legends* instead.



GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Ubisoft
Technically it's multiformat, but the X360 version we saw this month was especially tantalising. The detail's stunning – you can shoot the tape off barrels, and chips will fly off the bricks of the building you're using as cover. This is what we want to see.

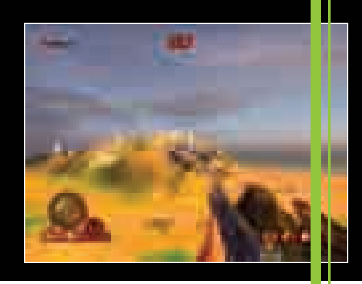


24: THE GAME

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sony
Prepare to be shocked – Sony's Cambridge Studio has finally realised that games have to look more than just pretty. Good on them, we say; from what we've played, *24: The Game* may actually turn out to be a solid action adventure with plenty of variety, and that's what we call 'a good thing'.



THE AMOUNT OF GAMES SUPPORTING XBOX LIVE CONTINUES TO GROW, THOUGH NOT ALL OF THEM ARE AS GOOD AS YOU MIGHT HAVE HOPED. ONCE AGAIN, GAMES™ BRAVES THE BEST (AND WORST) OF XBOX LIVE TO GIVE YOU AN INFORMED OPINION ON WHAT YOU SHOULD BE PLAYING…





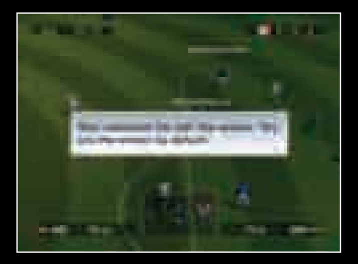
THE XBOX 360 MIGHT BE OUT, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S TIME TO PUT YOUR ORIGINAL XBOX ON THE

TRIED & TESTED

IT'S GOOD TO GO ONLINE

While the world and his dog are still clamouring to pick up what few Xbox 360s still remain unsold in the UK, people seem to be forgetting one crucial thing – Xbox Live is still up and running with original Xbox games. Some of the best titles the console has seen (certainly in respects to online play, at least) have been released in recent months, making it seem completely criminal that many people are going to simply overlook this wealth of community gaming just because they're too busy experiencing the next generation of gaming. So if Santa didn't bring you an Xbox 360 for Christmas this year (possibly by virtue of the fact that he's somewhat fictional), don't cry. Well okay, maybe cry just a little. But once you've dried your eyes, pop down the shops and blow some of that money you got sent by an aunt you never knew you had on a couple of new Xbox Live games, like the ones we've checked out here. Just don't try explaining what you actually bought in the thank you letter – as far as she's concerned, your new jumper is very nice.



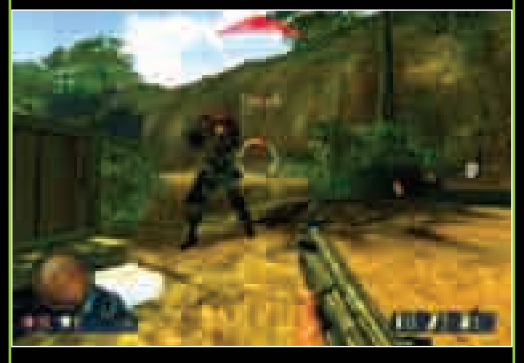



SHELF – THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF GREAT GAMES TO PLAY ONLINE WITH YOUR FRIENDS, YOU KNOW…

FAR CRY INSTINCTS

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

It might not look as nice as the PC version, but *Far Cry Instincts* is great fun online.



It didn't cause a splash on a PC multiplayer scene surrounded by people-magnets such as *Counter Strike* and *Unreal Tournament*, but landing on the Xbox in time for Christmas has given the Xbox version of Crytek's jungle-based shooter a chance to shine. It comes packing the usual team-based modes plus its own unique twists – derived from the single-player's predatory abilities – as well as an out-and-out Deathmatch mode if you can't get enough of killing.

While it won't usurp *Halo 2* in the hearts of white trash America, *Instincts*' Live modes are undeniably more interesting and less prone to the foul play to which Bungie's popular shooter has fallen victim. Default maps are strong on their own but on starting an Opti-match search, you'll notice a lot of custom maps being played. Whether it be for an unfair home-turf host advantage or the fleeting charm of playing poorly recreated *GoldenEye* maps, the custom maps should keep the online community both amused and alive next year. If you fancy a solid shooter with an online side that's destined to rate among the greats of the pre-next-gen tide, *Far Cry* should be your number one quarry.

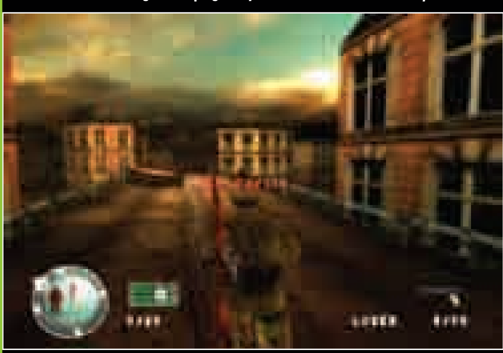
8/10

ABSORBING BUT RATHER LIMITED

SNIPER ELITE

YOU LIKE CAMPING, RIGHT?

The tactics of hiding and sniping really do work well online with *Sniper Elite*.



If you put to a regular online gamer the idea of a shooter based almost solely on sniper rifles, they'll probably tell you it couldn't work. Trust the aptly named Rebellion, then, to not only try it out but make it work as a great and unique Live experience. Naturally, with its emphasis on long-range kills, there's a lot of sweet hiding places in *Sniper Elite* but after a tour of the levels you'll come to recognise where your potential murderers-to-be will be camped out. With plenty of cover, you'll be able to either get the drop on any hidden foes or just find a suitable spot to fire off a few warning shots. Close combat weapons like SMGs and pistols help out when things get up close and personal and if that doesn't keep you entertained, the co-operative options surely will. Offering two people the chance to play through the campaign, the spotter/sniper combination is supremely satisfying so while the gunman readies his aim, the spotter can be scouring the landscape for possible targets. There are certainly stronger games out there but that doesn't stop *Sniper Elite* being a unique title that will keep gun nuts occupied for months.

7/10

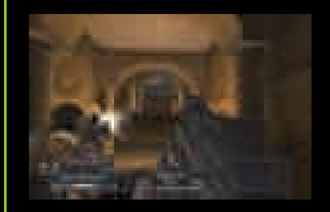
AN INTERESTING AND ORIGINAL ONLINE SHOOTER

blast from the past

Three Live gems that you'd do well to resurrect sometime soon.

RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW

Although *Lockdown* proved better online than off, we can't stop going back to its predecessor for a more traditional anti-terrorist fix. Ubisoft has gunplay down to a tee and this is arguably its finest online hour.



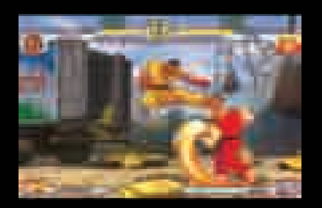
TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT

Combining frantic action, well-designed arenas and a serious spread of firearms, *Future Perfect* is a back-to-basics FPS which will never truly receive the recognition and community it deserves.



STREET FIGHTER: ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION

15 years' worth of fireballing and dragon punching experience pays off. *Third Strike* on Live is a delight, especially when punishing Dirty Ken with Stupid Q. Do it.

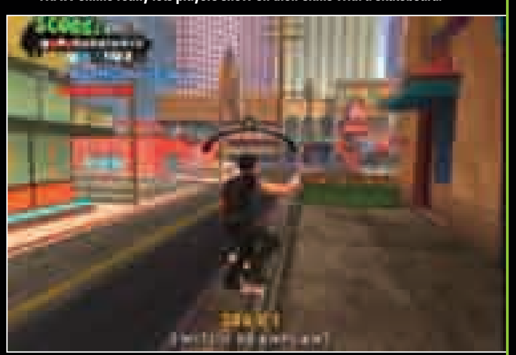


IT'S GOOD TO GO ONLINE

AS FAR AS WE'RE CONCERNED, SOME OF THE MOST ENJOYABLE MOMENTS OF GAMING CAN BE HAD WHEN

TONY HAWK'S AMERICAN WASTELAND

THAW online really lets players show off their skills with a skateboard.



BACK TO THE OLD-SCHOOL

While few could deny that Tony's single-player antics have taken a turn for the worse lately, the real shame is that the crux of the game – the skating engine itself – just keeps getting better. So while Story mode doesn't capitalise on this, there's no better forum to show off the fact that the series has still got it than the online scene. Doing away with menial tasks and simple score targets, *THAW*'s online modes are, for the most part, a genuine test of skill. Team modes level the playing field when one or two players start running away with the lead by several million points. And where split screen multiplayer has always been fantastic fun, Live play takes it to the next level. Sure, the pad isn't as well suited to the game as the Dual Shock 2, but the superior nature of Live over PS2 Online should attract plenty of fresh blood to the big trick extravaganza, even without leaderboards, content download and the like. Just steer clear of Slap mode and Fire Fight mode (skill-free deathmatch games that aren't any fun) and you're guaranteed a good time.

8/10

JUST THE SKILLS – THE WAY IT SHOULD BE

CONFLICT GLOBAL STORM

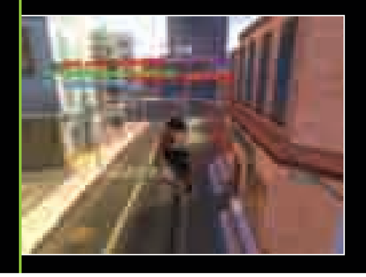
TERRORISE THIS



There's a lot to be said for four-player gaming. When your three comrades are moving in real-time rather than responding to button commands and waiting for you to switch to them, there's much more scope for proper tactical assaults. Then again, there's also potential for them to try and play *Conflict* like *Halo 2,* a silly error and one that will see them shot to ribbons in a matter of seconds. In that respect, *Global Storm* is almost exactly as good over Live as the people you play with. Jump into a random game alongside three cretins with ill-advised Gamertags and you'll have the least fun ever. Round up three mates who know their stuff, on the other hand, and *Conflict* is an absolute joy. Replacing team-mates doesn't fix all the game's issues, though – enemy AI is still dangerously erratic, swinging from moronic rush tactics to genuinely intelligent strategic planning. And while the game loses a little something from locking you to a single character, a better sense of team play and mortality balances this out. By no means a must-own Live title, but if you prefer co-operation over free-for-all frag-fests, you could do a lot worse than *Conflict.*

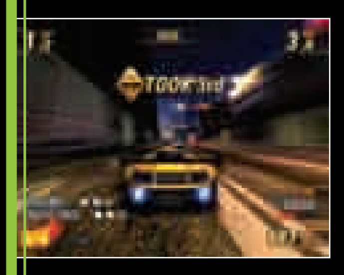
6/10

ONLY AS GOOD AS YOUR TEAM-MATES





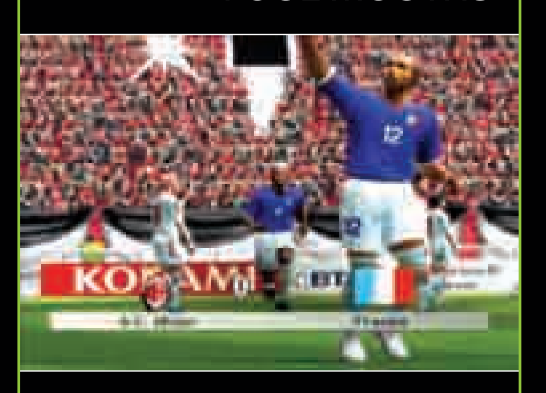




PLAYING ONLINE – STICK WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND YOU'RE GUARANTEED TO HAVE A RIGHT BLAST…

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 5

BEAUTIFUL GOALS AND FOUL MOUTHS



Oh, the excuses. It's as though Konami created the most wonderful football series specifically to make players delve into the deepest recesses of their imaginations and concoct ridiculous 'reasons' that cover up a distinct lack of skill. Being 'jipped' is a popular phrase around these parts, as is paranoid chatter about the game's 'scripting', but as you might imagine, taking things online knocks things a few rungs up the verbal ladder. Connection quality, on the whole, seems far better than last year's Xbox debut for the series and along with this fundamental improvement comes a brand new structuring system. Starting at Amateur level, you amass points for punishing rivals (as well as forfeiting them for those 'scripted' losses) and try to work your way up through the rankings to Division One. It's a constantly changing system and will keep players busy – just trying to claw your way out of the Sunday leagues is a nightmare. With servers now catering for two players per Xbox, two-on-two matches over Live are the real highlight of this year's *Evolution*. At least that way you've got something physical to blame for your gaming shortcomings.

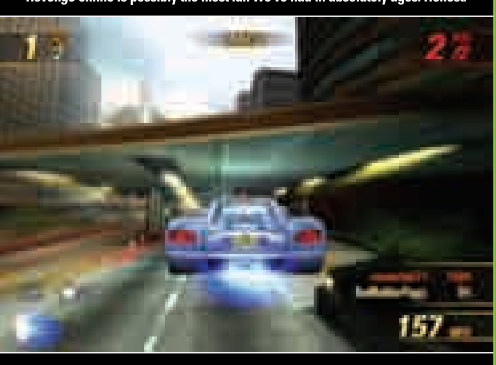
9/10

THE QUINTESSENTIAL ONLINE SPORTS TITLE

BURNOUT REVENGE

FAST LANE TO WRITE-OFF IN 0.2 SECONDS

Revenge **online is possibly the most fun we've had in absolutely ages. Honest.**



Cursing EA's name isn't uncommon among more seasoned gamers. But when *Burnout 3* came out, there was no better time to combine 'Arts', 'Electronic' and the obscenity of your choice in one sentence. EA's entrance onto the Live scene was what those in the trade refer to as 'a total mess' – server issues abound and even if you could get a game, chances are you wouldn't get to stay in it for very long. So even when the initial problems had blown over, many had already given up on playing *Takedown* online. No such problems have impaired our enjoyment of *Revenge*, however – in the last year, EA's network teething troubles have cleared up and the result is a strong Live community for a brilliant game. Having to unlock the various classes of car online as well as off is something of a chore and means that you'll have to hunt for similarly inexperienced opponents in the early stages of the online game, but it's worth it – Road Rage is better than ever and even basic races and crash events are given an added thrill by the extra human opposition. Perfect for turning a lazy Sunday into a hideous cocktail of trash talk and vehicular non-death.

8/10

MAKES ROAD RAGE SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE. SORT OF.

no way, no way

Introducing the 'Not Even If You Paid Us' Live selection

MARVEL NEMESIS: RISE OF THE IMPERFECTS

Unbalanced fighters, clumsy combat – don't get *Nemesis*, save your cash for something you're not going to regret after 13 seconds. Like a puppy. Or a kebab. Or a nice jumper.



FIGHT CLUB

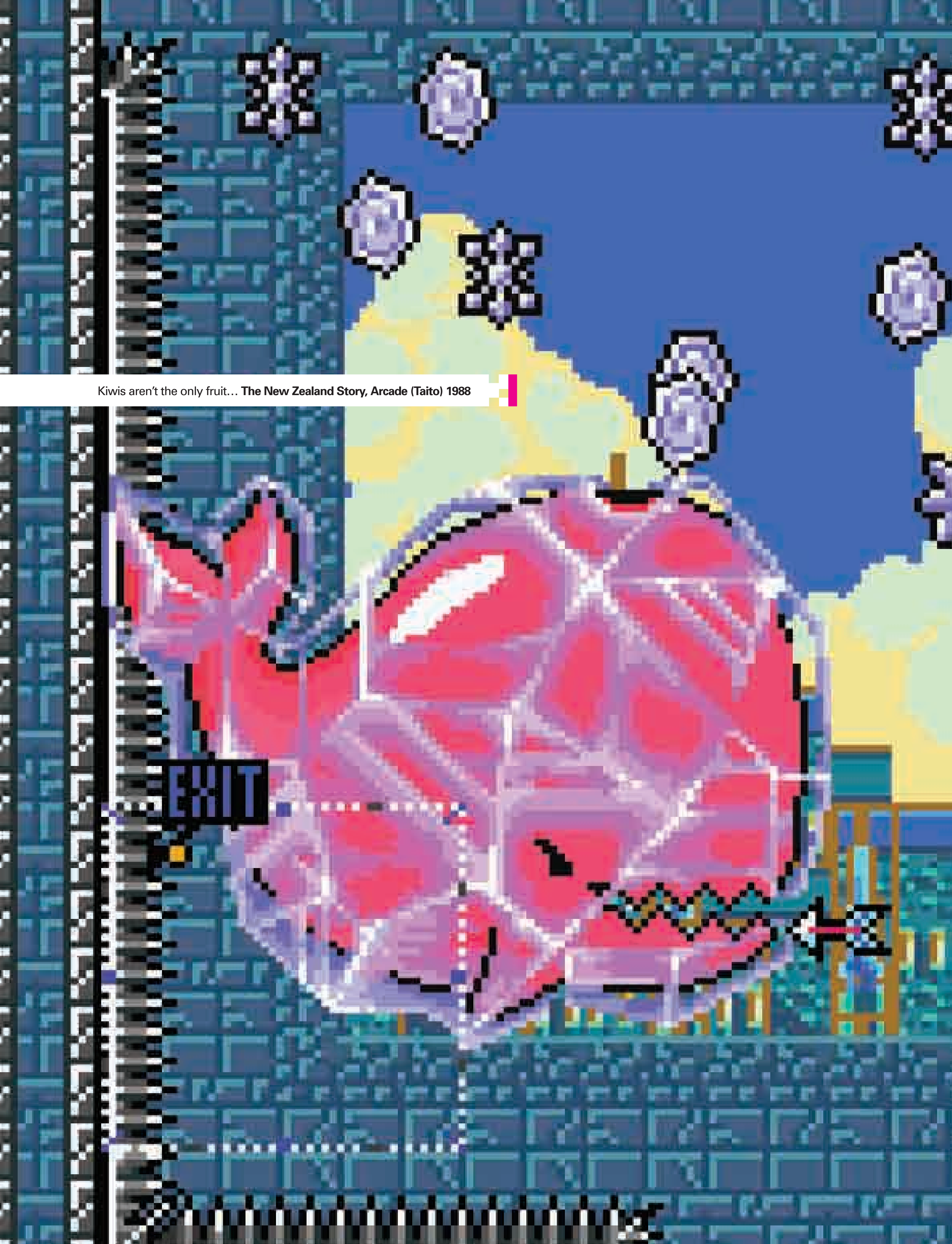
Another woeful fighter, you say? The core game mechanics are so far beyond broken that it isn't even funny. This was always destined to be bargain bin fodder and as far as we're concerned, it deserves to stay there. Forever.



ADVENT RISING

Publishers know when they have a stinker on their hands, so offering a million-dollar prize for people willing to wade through this atrocity to find Easter Eggs was surely the ultimate apology. No word on whether it'll be repeated.





Kiwis aren’t the only fruit… **The New Zealand Story, Arcade (Taito) 1988**





ROGUE GALAXY



NEW ENVIRONMENT, NEW STORYLINE, NEW GAME – LEVEL-5 RAISES THE BAR

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Level-5
RELEASE: TBA '06 (US: Q2 '06)
GENRE: RPG
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

From the maker of *Dark Chronicle* comes an entirely new RPG, featuring a band of plucky space pirates and a whole range of revolutionary features.

HISTORY

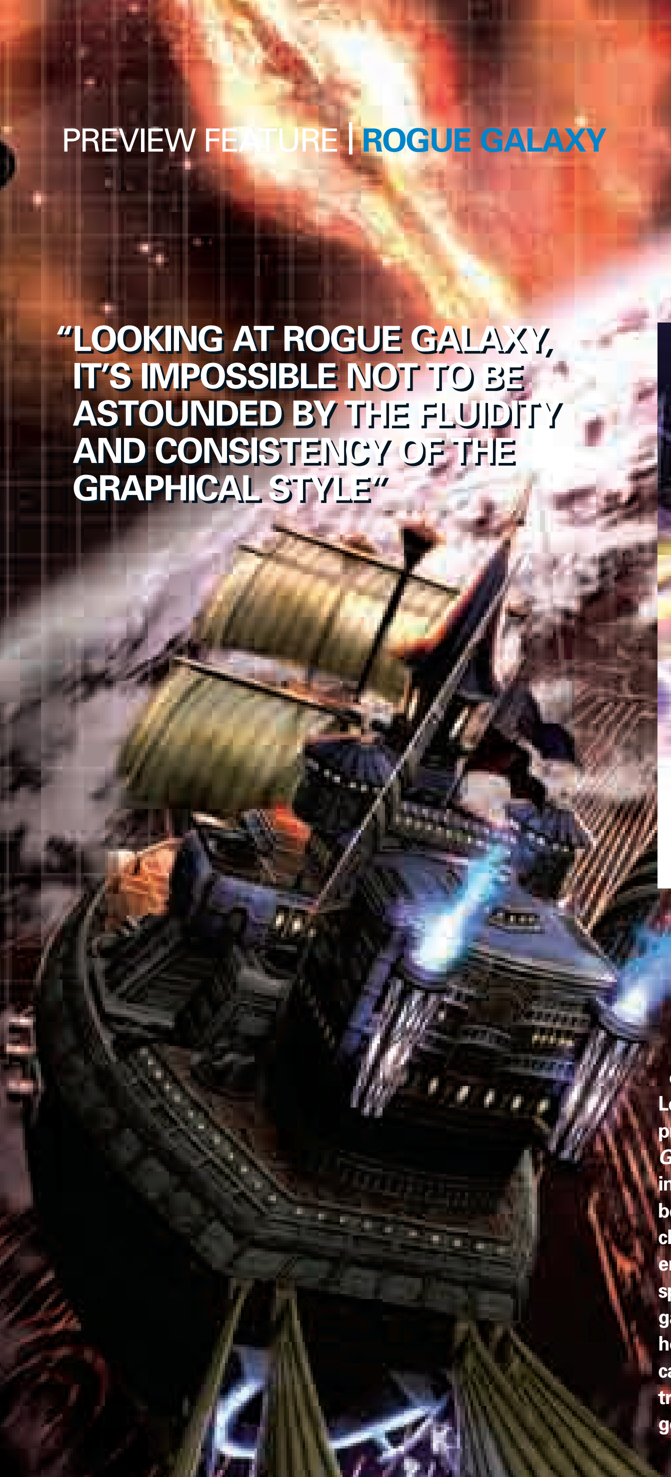
Rogue Galaxy follows *Dark Cloud* and *Dark Chronicle* – hugely successful games for Level-5 both at home in Japan and overseas.

We've featured two space-themed RPGs in the last two issues. Last month it was *Mass Effect*, from Canadian developer BioWare; this month it's *Rogue Galaxy*, a hotly anticipated project from Level-5, the Japanese creator of *Dark Chronicle*. These two games are a perfect example of the classic differences between eastern and western RPGs, with entirely opposing art styles and storytelling ethos. Where the west goes for open-ended plotlines and player choice, the east has always tended to favour more linear progression and an in-depth focus on interactive storytelling. It's what these games have in common though, rather than what marks their different origins, that makes them both worth examining: a very talented team of developers, exceptional presentation and a burning desire to challenge the conventions of role-playing games and revolutionise the genre with new and exciting ideas.

New ideas are something to which Level-5 is no stranger. *Dark Cloud* and *Dark Chronicle* were both unique and enthralling RPGs, the latter becoming a well loved classic both in Japan and overseas. *Dark Chronicle* featured a unique Georama system; instead of being charged with the task of saving the world, the spiky haired hero and heroine had to create it by rebuilding the future. The player could build and populate villages according to blueprints in order to create a perfect world. The game also featured randomised dungeons – intended to break the monotony often inherent in Japanese RPGs due to their typically linear nature – and a weapon development system with a depth and staggering complexity that left many a gamer poring obsessively over stats menus in an effort to forge the ultimate battle tool.

The game's charm lay in its cheerful style, innovative features and sheer depth – three factors also apparent in *Rogue*

"LOOKING AT ROGUE GALAXY, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO BE ASTOUNDED BY THE FLUIDITY AND CONSISTENCY OF THE GRAPHICAL STYLE"



Real-time combat or not, there are still some very flashy special moves.

Galaxy, although it's not a sequel to Level-5's earlier titles."We wanted to create a completely new series with new game design," explains Akihiro Hino, the game's producer and director and one of the founders of Level-5. "The story is not related to the previous games in the series." *Rogue Galaxy* is, instead, the story of a group of intrepid space pirates who eventually become written into legend. The main character Jestaur Rogue is mistakenly employed by the notorious Dorgengoa space pirates as they roam the Milky Way galaxy in search of treasure. Over 40 hours of adventure await him in his new capacity as a space buccaneer and as he travels the world, Jestaur's motives, goals and associates change accordingly.

It's not a friendly galaxy. Rivalries and skirmishes between worlds are rife and enterprising pirates will do anything to lay their hands on the spoils of war. Jestaur's epic quest spans entire planets and he'll encounter characters from all backgrounds. "This title is as big as you have ever seen," says Hino. "The number of backdrops and boss monsters, the size of the world… anything you can think of is enormous." Level-5's ultimate focus is upon immersing the player in its world to the point where the game becomes an experience, rather than just another RPG on the shelves.

Also in the name of innovation, *Rogue Galaxy*'s battle system is something quite unlike anything we've seen. Although Level-5 has confirmed that the weapon customisation from *Dark Chronicle* will return to some extent (it's not yet clear in what way), everything else about the new real-time combat is unique. Each character has two close-range and melee weapons that will make a huge difference to battles, and the player can choose to control any member of the party during the fight. Special moves can be executed via a press of the PlayStation2's shoulder buttons and team attacks with other characters are also possible. The aim of the real-time combat is to give the game a sense of immediacy and urgency, as Hino explains, "The fusion of action-style RPG and command-style RPG is what this title aimed for. A completely new battle system with a new feel, which possesses a great mix of action and command-style strategy was realised. I really would like everyone to experience it."

Of course, innovation within the RPG genre can be quite difficult to pull off,

LIFE OF THEIR OWN

One of the rather more interesting aspects of the battle system used in *Rogue Galaxy* is the fact that the non-controlled party members actually have proper artificial intelligence. You, the player, assume the position of squad leader and your team-mates then let their wants and needs be known to you via on-screen text and conversation; "I want to use a spell," for instance, or "I want to use healing medicine," will often be heard. You then have the ability to either authorise or deny these requests, thereby maintaining control over the battle without having to issue commands directly and in the heat of combat.

Characters also have the ability to join together in order to perform special moves in real-time. Those individuals who have ranged weapons should have the sense to stay back and act as support for those sent in with the melee option.

STUDIO PROFILE

■ Level-5 has developed three top-notch RPG titles for the PS2, since the studio's formation in 1998. It's seen success even beyond its own *Dark Cloud* IP – charged with the task of developing a *Dragon Quest* game last year, the studio rose to the challenge admirably and delivered an instalment which fans adored.

HISTORY

- DRAGON QUEST VIII 2005 [PS2]
- DARK CHRONICLE 2003 [PS2]
- DARK CLOUD 2001 [PS2]



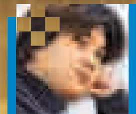
■ Pirates aren't always the most welcome of visitors, so be prepared for confrontation.

"I AM CONFIDENT NOW, THAT WHAT WE HAVE PRODUCED, ALTHOUGH DIFFERENT, WILL BE ACCEPTED BY MANY PEOPLE"
AKIHIRO HINO, DIRECTOR, LEVEL-5

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

SPACE SWASHBUCKLING

SKIES OF ARCADIA x OUTER SPACE + REAL-TIME COMBAT = ROGUE GALAXY



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Akihiro Hino is a founder and director at Level-5, having worked in PC programming before starting work with the PlayStation. He's in control of all of Level-5's games as a producer/director, and as a designer also has an active input into their creation.

HISTORY

- DRAGON QUEST VIII 2005 [PS2]
- DARK CHRONICLE 2003 [PS2]
- DARK CLOUD 2001 [PS2]

■ Allies can be gathered from across the galaxy, from barren deserts to Amazonian jungles.

HAVE WE MET BEFORE?

Despite the absence of the Georama system and randomised dungeons from Level-5's previous games, *Rogue Galaxy* sets out with a firm ambition of being just as distinct as its predecessors in terms of interesting game features. Hino hinted that something equally distinctive might play a part in *Rogue Galaxy*. "This time, there are no random dungeons or Georama system but, of course, there is a special system that replaces these modes which we hope players will enjoy just as much," he comments, somewhat cryptically.

Naturally, we are all mightily intrigued to discover what this curious 'special system' might be, although if it turns out to be something as fundamental to *Rogue Galaxy* as the Georama system was to *Dark Chronicle*, the fact that it is being kept a closely guarded secret right up until the game's release would be an extremely strange move indeed…

even in a country where RPGs almost invariably dominate the charts – a fact Akihiro Hino is particularly aware of having worked on an instalment of the massively successful *Dragon Quest* series as well as on his studio's own IP. "In Japan, in the RPG genre, the *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* series hold the dominant share in sales," he says. "In those two series, established systems exist and it is difficult for those games to try something radically different. However, we felt challenged to create an RPG with a completely different system from those two titles. I am confident now, that although it is different, what we have produced will be accepted by many people."

Graphical style has long been a predominant aspect of Level-5's effort to forge its own particular identity and push for innovation through its games. From looking at *Rogue Galaxy*, it's impossible not to be astounded by the smooth and consistent graphical style – characters come alive in gorgeous cel-shading and fluid outlines. "Since our know-how has reached a very high level with our use of cel-shading on previous titles, we decided to adopt this style as a Level-5 trademark," smiles Hino when questioned about why his studio did not opt for a different style this time around. "The cel-shaded visual style is a technique that can express an ambient atmosphere of Japanese-style animation that we can show off to the world." Indeed, several technologies have been combined to make *Rogue Galaxy* play out like an interactive anime in terms of visual style – the cinematic battle camera and meticulously detailed backdrops make the game look like the animated epic that Level-5 assures us it will be.

And the final ingredient to make sure that players remain captivated throughout this grand adventure? Excellent characterisation. "This time around, I tried to dig into the characters' personal drama to complete the story of each one of them," says Hino. "In [*Dark Chronicle*], it was difficult to do this as we had to create the story around the Georama system. In *Rogue Galaxy* we were sure to build up the story of each character, so by the time the game is finished, I am hoping players will have grown fond of each one of the characters." No expense has been spared in ensuring that the characters are as believable as they should be – voice actors and dialogue writers were selected with the utmost care in order to make *Rogue Galaxy*'s protagonists authentic. We're already praying that Sony doesn't ruin it all with some half-hearted American/English translation…

Rogue Galaxy's engaging visual style and excellent action-packed combat will hopefully help it bridge the gap between eastern and western audiences and prove a success in all territories. "The game's most unusual aspect has to be the good tempo of battles and their strategic nature… I am expecting that those elements will be a hot topic after the release," says Hino. Although, speaking honestly, it's difficult to pick out one aspect of Level-5's cohesive whole to pinpoint as particularly worthy of anticipation – the studio has created a game with an appealing style and seamless universe which does everything possible to draw the player in. Hino hopes to spearhead a new initiative in interactive storytelling, and at the moment it looks as though he cannot help but succeed come the game's release.

"ALTHOUGH ROGUE GALAXY IS SET IN A SCIENCE FICTION UNIVERSE, IT'S NOT STERILE; A WARM VIEW OF THE WORLD IS REALISED"

AKIHIRO HINO, DIRECTOR



Akihiro Hino considers the high-tempo battling to be one of this game's chief strengths.

As in Level-5's other games, the visuals in *Rogue Galaxy* are bright and appealing.

A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR ME

With Hino insisting that characterisation is paramount to *Rogue Galaxy*'s success, it's no surprise that the game's heroes – the people you'll spend all of your time with – are rich in life and detail…

JESTAUR ROGUE

Jestaur is erroneously recruited into the Dorgengoa pirate band early in the game after being mistaken for someone else. Nonetheless, he takes to buccaneering and proves his worth enough to remain within the team. Raised on a desert planet, Jestaur is good-natured but occasionally puts his foot in it due to his natural frankness.

ZEGRAM

Also called 'the hunter known as Black Wolf' in a vaguely Prince-esque stylee, this man is an ally of the Dorgengoa pirates – although he is fairly mysterious. Blessed with a sharp tongue and a very cool eye-patch, he'll be Jestaur's fighting companion on many an occasion throughout his piracy career.

KISARA

Kisara is the daughter of the Dorgengoa pirates' leader and becomes Jestaur's good friend. Tomboyish and tough enough to survive in her father's crew of hardy pirates, her fearless nature makes her a very valuable ally.

"LEVEL-5 HAS CREATED A GAME WHOSE APPEALING STYLE AND SEAMLESS UNIVERSE DO EVERYTHING TO DRAW THE PLAYER IN"

SAINT'S ROW



VIDEOGAMES MATHS

ALL THE ACTION, NONE OF THE TRAGIC LONELINESS

SAN ANDREAS + BOYZ N THE HOOD - CANE FROM KUNG FU = SAINT'S ROW

"A GAMEPLAY-RICH WORLD INTO WHICH GAMERS WILL BE ABLE TO UTTERLY IMMERSE THEMSELVES"

MICKEY TORODE, THQ

■ Terrorising drivers and then pinching their cars isn't the be all and end all of this *GTA*-alike.

■ The mystery of the missing C4 was solved in what was described as a 'messy but admittedly hilarious' way.

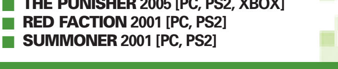


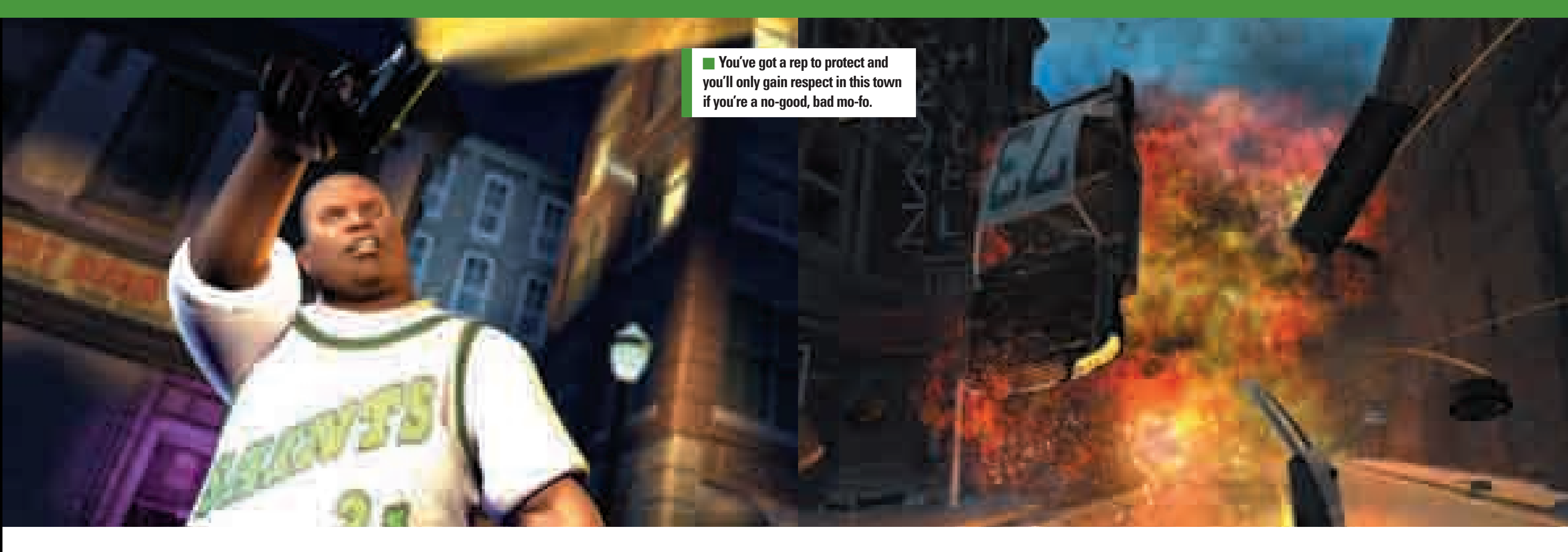
DEVELOPER PROFILE

Since rising from the ashes of Parallax Software in 1996, Volition hasn't exactly flooded the market with games over the years. However, with the recent release of *The Punisher, Saint's Row* on the horizon and a series of unannounced titles for next-gen consoles on the way, we can expect to see a lot more from Volition.

HISTORY

- **THE PUNISHER** 2005 [PC, PS2, XBOX]
- **RED FACTION** 2001 [PC, PS2]
- **SUMMONER** 2001 [PC, PS2]





You've got a rep to protect and you'll only gain respect in this town if you're a no-good, bad mo-fo.

JUST GETTING THE GTA REFERENCES OUT OF THE WAY EARLY…

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Volition
RELEASE: February '06
GENRE: Action Adventure
PLAYERS: 1 (Multiplayer TBA)

CONCEPT

It's all about respect, always. Grab a gun, play it cool or be a crazy fool, and build up a crew to make your turf your own.

So what do we have here? Another free-roaming mean-street adventure putting the theft into *Grand Theft Auto*? Many games in this bludgeoned genre are taking 'Liberties' with the licence in a 'Vice'-like grip. We're not sure whether Volition is taking the piss, but the term 'San' is commonly used as prefix in places named after a saint. Coincidence? Let's see…

Saint's Row certainly runs with the clichéd *San Andreas* theme of a wannabe bad-ass gangsta shooting his way through a gangland turf war; as such, expect a land of junkies, hookers, pimps and freaks smothered by armies of gun-toting monkeys echoing with the golden jingle of bling. The concept is about as original as turning bread into toast, but Volition is keen to emphasise that it's the application of these ideas that counts. Taking the good points from *GTA*, dropping what it sees as flaws and adding a few neat twists, Volition has *Saint's Row* lined up as a much more compact adventure that taxes the mind instead of the feet. Well, a bit anyway.

The city is nowhere near the size of *San Andreas;* still, all of the key areas are linked by a rail system, so those long walks and repetitive car-jackings aren't always necessary. There are those who enjoy cruising the streets but we don't have a run-down of the tunes on offer yet and we don't want to be stuck in a car with Mariah Carey for 20 minutes. It's just not worth it.

Obviously, the aim of the game is to move around neighbourhoods, taking a piece at a time, but *Saint's Row* makes quite a fuss over how this is done. It's all about respect y'see? Sure, you've got goals and objectives, but simple completion just isn't going to cut it with the big boys in town – you need to make a name for yourself as a hardcore daddy who'd kill his own mum for an ounce of crack. The downside, however, is that the local cops aren't too keen on this kind of behaviour.

Here's a typical *Saint's Row* scenario: there's a store loaded with weapons and ammo that you need, and a few sparkling rocks that would look great encrusted into a medallion the size of a Frisbee. You could stroll in, unleash a machine gun, flatten the joint, stuff everything in a swag bag and run for the door. The homies would 'dig that shit' and everyone would love you for your cahones of steel. Trouble is the coppers will be all over you as if you were two donuts in a denim sack.

Alternatively, you can wait until nightfall, break in and – as long as you play it cool and keep quiet – you can be chomping on a Big Mac before the police even know about it. It's not as daring as an armed raid, but you'll get a bit of R.E.S.P.E.C.T. from the locals. Option C is to actually buy the things you need like a big girl's blouse. You won't get a lot of respect, but you'll have a bag full of guns and a 'have a nice day' from the storeowner. Touching stuff.

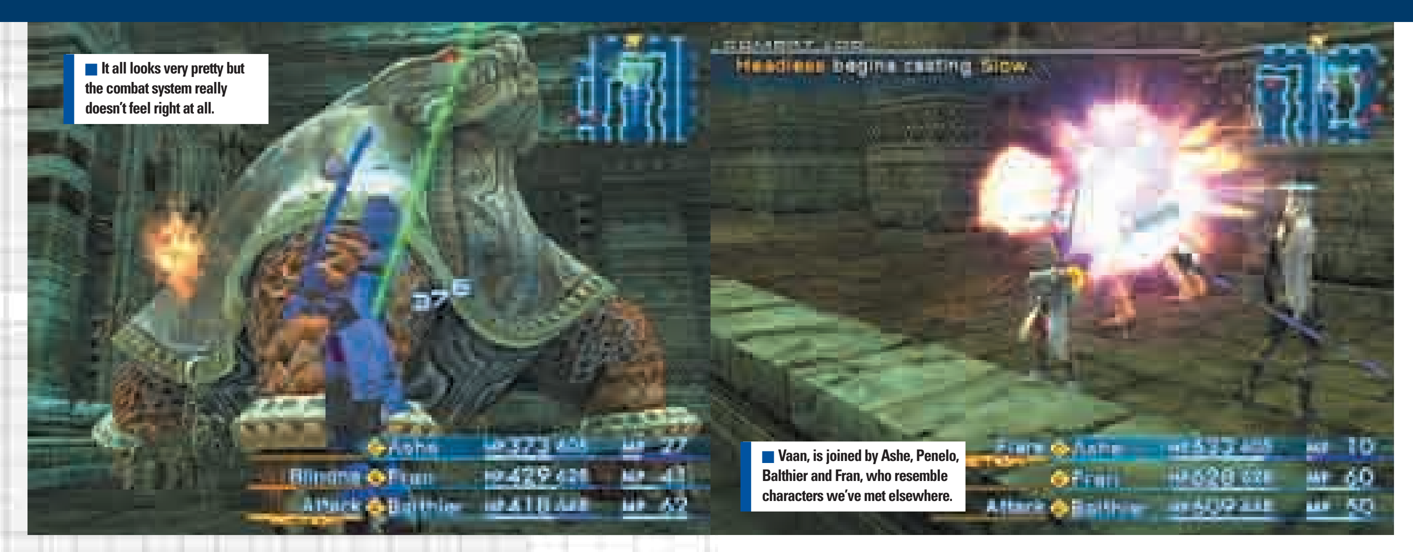
A *GTA* descendant it may be but at least *Saint's Row* plays for something other than the cheap clone. Let's not forget one of the biggest factors in its potential success: taking Xbox 360 turf and laying down some sweet visual moves before most of its competitors have even put their rings on. But while potential is one thing, the realisation of any kind of original competition for *GTA* on any format is a whole new free-roaming world.

"EXPECT A LAND OF JUNKIES, HOOKERS, PIMPS AND FREAKS SMOTHERED BY ARMIES OF GUN-TOTING MONKEYS"

BROTHERS IN ARMS

The way to earn respect is to recruit a posse of delinquents and create what's commonly known as a gang. If you're playing with just a few dollars and a stolen bike you'll have a not-so-solid crew, but as you work your way through the hood you'll soon build up an army of street-smart homies. As well as flirting your style and waving guns around you can up your respect levels by wheeling and dealing illegal substances, pimping out be-atches, or fulfilling a need for speed underground on the street-racing circuit. The only other thing you need to do on your meteoric rise to the top is to take your customised character down to Walmart to glam yourself up with all the latest bling that'll make the town love you even more. Word.

FINAL FANTASY XII



It all looks very pretty but the combat system really doesn't feel right at all.

Vaan, is joined by Ashe, Penelo, Balthier and Fran, who resemble characters we've met elsewhere.

FINAL FANTASY STUMBLES INTO A BRAVE NEW WORLD

PS2 ***Final Fantasy XII* is in trouble.** Not because it's been hibernating in Square Enix's development studios for far longer than anyone anticipated. Not because *Final Fantasy X-2* and *XI* have muddied the waters and dulled the appetite for a true sequel. *Final Fantasy XII* is in trouble because it's going through an identity crisis. It's an identity crisis that will ultimately determine whether *Final Fantasy* successfully erradicates long-standing criticism of the series or if PlayStation2's era will be book-ended by the most disappointing *Final Fantasy* games in recent memory.

With *Final Fantasy XI* being the chance for Square Enix to dip its toes in online waters, most fans were placated by the knowledge that *XII* would be a return to the offline 'roots' of the series. However, the distinction isn't as black and white as it first seemed; *Final Fantasy XII* is essentially *Final Fantasy XI* offline, as you travel the world with two party members in tow, complete with their own artificial intelligence. You can see enemies in the distance and when engaging in combat, rather than the stylish fades or swirls of old that would cut to a new battle screen, you fight them on the same screen.

This answers the age-old complaint against the series that random battles serve to frustrate rather than inspire – an archaic gameplay mechanic from a bygone era. Unfortunately, the new battle system taking its place currently lacks any confidence or focus. You can select from the usual *Final Fantasy* options (Attack, Magic, Summons, Items and so on) and range is the over-riding factor in determining whether you complete each action successfully. To give an obvious example, sword-wielding Basch needs to be close to attack. If he's out of range when his turn rolls around, you'll have to wait for your next turn before you can try again. In the meantime, enemies are also attacking and you're free to move around while your AI team-mates make their own decisions during the fight if left unprompted.

The problem is that arranging any sort of advanced tactics is near impossible in the chaos of combat, as there's too much micro-management occurring when you're in charge of three separate people. Queuing attacks is tough when you're taking range into consideration and it feels as though a few layers of strategy have been stripped away to allow for this new combat mechanism. Square Enix has second-guessed this problem and included a 'Wait' option, giving you time to plan your attacks. However, this is a form of over-compensation, giving combat a staccato feel and drawing each battle out to a slow, painful slug-fest.

If *Final Fantasy XII* is to succeed, it needs to find some sort of middle ground between the two. As you might expect, the battle system begins to untangle itself as you spend more time with it, but there's no question that it still needs a good spring clean. Even if the battle system fails, that doesn't necessarily mean *Final Fantasy XII* will fail. After all, *Final Fantasy VIII* is still held in high regard despite its widely criticised magic system and, of course, there's still the trump card of high production values to be played, with the possibility of another Aeris moment in the storyline to capture the imagination. As things currently stand, *Final Fantasy XII* needs it.

"IT'S AN IDENTITY CRISIS THAT WILL DETERMINE WHETHER FINAL FANTASY ANSWERS LONG-STANDING CRITICISM OF THE SERIES"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: Q4 '06 (Japan: March '06, US: August '06)
GENRE: RPG
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Final Fantasy XII tries to bring the MMORPG experience offline, abolishing the random battle system and bringing in team-mates with their own artificial intelligence.

SKY PIRATES FOR THE WIN

***Final Fantasy XII*'s storyline is centred on Vaan, the usual effeminate hero from Square Enix with blonde hair and pretty features. Vaan wants to escape his street life and dreams of piloting an airship. While war rages in Vaan's world of Dalmasca, he meets Princess Ashe (presumed missing), Penelo (a dead-ringer for *Samurai Shodown*'s Mina), Balthier (gun-wielding sky pirate similar to *FFVIII*'s Irvine) and Fran (similar to *FFIX*'s Freya). And so the adventure begins. If previous form is anything to go by, this is shaping up to be a typical *Final Fantasy* storyline, giving teenagers plenty to be enchanted by and cynical gamers plenty to sneer at.**

DEVELOPER PROFILE

SQUARE ENIX

■ Square merged with Enix in April 2003 and relocated to Yoyogi in Shibuya, Tokyo. Square Enix has since acquired Taito Corporation, released *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* on DVD and UMD and is now shaping up for the release of *Final Fantasy XII*.

HISTORY

- **MUSASHI SAMURAI LEGEND** 2005 [PS2]
- **FINAL FANTASY XI** 2003 [PC]
- **FINAL FANTASY X-2** 2003 [PS2]



■ When keeping an eye on three separate people, planning advanced tactics gets tricky.

"THE REVOLUTIONARY GAMEPLAY, INCLUDING THE SEAMLESS EXPLORATION AND BATTLE SYSTEM, IS SURE TO PLEASE FANS OF THE SERIES, BOTH OLD AND NEW"

PRESS RELEASE, SQUARE ENIX

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

BAR-ROOM BRAWL

FINAL FANTASY XI + SEPARATE AI x MESSY FIGHTING = FINAL FANTASY XII

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER



"WE HAVE IMPROVED TACTICAL FEATURES, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE TECHNOLOGY THAT THE SOLDIERS OF THE FUTURE WILL USE"
MATHIEU GIRARD, PRODUCER

VIDEOGAMES MATHS
ADVANCED WAR

GHOST RECON 2 + PHYSICS x MEXICO = ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Attacking from the air is a good option when things get hot, but you can call for support from the ground.

While the single-player shows much promise, the multiplayer mode will prove hugely popular.

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

XBOX 360/MULTIFORMAT



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Ubisoft's acquisition of the *Tom Clancy* licences (*Splinter Cell, Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* respectively) has brought us several high-quality products over the years. The previous *Ghost Recon* titles are games whose high production values and excellent online multiplayer aspects distinguished them as stand-out games in the genre.

HISTORY

■ **TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON 2,** 2005 [Multi]
■ **TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX 3,** 2004 [Multi]
■ **TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL,** 2002 [Xbox]

ADVANCE AND DESTROY

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360, Xbox, PS2, PC
ORIGIN: France/US
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Tiwak/Red Storm
RELEASE: February '06
GENRE: Tactical Shooter
PLAYERS: 1 (Online 2-8)

CONCEPT

■ Built 'from the ground up' for next-generation technology, this next *Ghost Recon* game promises the ultimate urban warfare experience.

Considering *Advanced Warfighter* is set to appear on current-gen consoles as well as PC and Xbox 360, it's pleasantly surprising to see an X360 build of the game that looks as if it really takes advantage of the machine's capabilities. The attention to detail, stunning visuals and impressive enemy AI really impress even at this stage. *Ghost Recon 3* feels like a next-generation urban war game – it may not be revolutionary (although it does incorporate innovative features), but the refinement that *Advanced Warfighter* displays is an equally valid form of progression.

Set in Mexico City in 2013, urban warfare has broken out and the American Ghost Recon specialists have been sent in to diffuse the situation. Not surprisingly, the titular advanced warfighters are equipped with even higher calibre weaponry and gadgetry than ever, including the CrossCom, a satellite communication device that lets you see from the eyes of team-mates, remote droids and any other available unit. This means that the player can send flying droids in to check out other areas for enemies and keep a close eye on far-off team-mates as you engage in different firefights. Handy, that.

The city is expansive and detailed, from the shine on roadside cars to the bullet-chipped bricks on the corners of buildings. It's also surprisingly open, giving the player several options for getting from A to B while avoiding detection. There's usually a less obvious way to get somewhere that provides more cover, but doesn't leave you in a desirable offensive position – it adds a new element of choice and offers several possible ways to approach a situation, even if it doesn't give total freedom.

Avoiding detection, however, is trickier than ever. Enemies respond to the noise of even a single mis-fired shot and are smart enough to take cover, station snipers and generally try to outwit you. Although the team-mate AI wasn't quite there in the build that we played, we've been promised advanced intelligence from them too – they'll respond to situations appropriately without instruction and automatically find the best route to a destination. Gone, we hope, are the days when suicidal team-mates run into your line of fire and stand out in the open rather than hiding behind the building just next to them.

It's the attention to detail, though, that really makes *Ghost Recon* feel next generation. The visual detail is impressive in itself, right down to the rumpling of team-mates' clothing, but it's the way environments react that's most pleasing. Shooting the tape holding together a stack of boxes, for instance, makes them tumble realistically, and everything reacts properly when shot or stepped upon. It really makes the city and the warfare feel more real than ever before. It's the level of environmental interaction that we expect from next-gen videogames and it's encouraging to see such detail this early on.

We suspect that *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* won't fail to impress fans of the series, especially the game's large online community – online multiplayer is a dead cert, although no details of Red Storm's efforts have yet been released. It's a strong title for the Xbox 360 – hopefully, by the game's February release date, the console will actually be freely available…

> "ADVANCED WARFIGHTER IS A NEXT-GENERATION TITLE IN MORE THAN JUST NAME"

HOT CROSSCOM

The CrossCom communicator is a fantastically useful thing. The viewpoint of the selected unit – be that team-mate, droid or helicopter – is displayed in the top left of the screen and commands can be issued easily using the D-pad. The little flying droid is probably the most useful thing as it can be sent in to detect enemies which are pointed out on screen; sending it into enemy territory, however, leaves it open to fire. If there's a helicopter to hand, the CrossCom also allows you to order air strikes on specific enemies, or groups thereof. As far as ordering team-mates goes, it's no more complicated than it needs to be – 'Go There', 'Follow Me', 'Attack' and 'Hold' are about all the commands you'll need.



■ Working as a team is still very much the order of the day, especially if you want to co-ordinate your strike.

TABULA RASA



A futuristic, inter-planetary warfare game just had to feature huge, mechanical spaceships.

The game's unique FPS stylings genuinely make a difference.

WAR! BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: NCsoft
DEVELOPER: Destination Games
RELEASE: Q2 '06
GENRE: MMORPFPS
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer

CONCEPT

An ambitious, genre-merging online game, headed up by British developer Richard Garriott.

There was a time when the MMO genre was characterised by a crippling lack of variety, and anyone looking for anything other than a swords-and-sorcery backdrop for massively multiplayer adventuring was destined for disappointment. Those days are gone and MMO games now span a huge range of scenarios, from the ridiculously complex, lush world of Vana'diel to the villain-ridden Paragon City and the vast desert expanses of *Star Wars Galaxies*. As huge fans of NCsoft's recent MMOs – *Guild Wars* and *City Of Heroes* – we were happy to hear that the publisher is planning another, developed by Richard Garriott of *Ultima* and *City Of Heroes* fame at the newly formed studio, Destination Games. This one, however, is more than a little different.

As a space-themed war game set in the distant future when a race of aliens bent on destroying the galaxy arrive in human territory, *Tabula Rasa* can only really be described as a 'massively multiplayer online role-playing first-person shooter'. Armed with a formidable arsenal and a selection of special alien 'Logos' abilities, it's your job to join a resistance force made up of human and alien rebels and fight to regain the galaxy. It's structured more like a war game than your typical MMORPG, with players from opposing factions fighting for (and winning) territories as part of an ongoing battle; kind of like *PlanetSide* but with more adventuring thrown in.

You can expect the in-depth character development, quest structure and customisation options of usual MMORPGs. The option to save a character template before important decisions – providing you with both a safeguard if it turns out to be a mistake, and the opportunity to see what happens if you do it differently on another play through – hints at a complex ongoing storyline. *Tabula Rasa*'s real focus, though, is on combining exciting, real-time combat with the depth of a typical MMO. For those used to online *Counter-Strike* and *Battlefield* matches, there's a fast-paced and familiar first-person combat interface and the concept of territories and war; for the online RPG community there's a wealth of weaponry, quests, collectables and an emphasis on player choice. Whether the developer can satisfy both diverse sets of online gamers is a pressing question, but *Tabula Rasa* has enough ambition and talent working on it to provoke our interest, regardless.

He may be big, but he's not clever. Only a fool would take on planet Earth. Tom Cruise lives here, after all.

"STRUCTURED MORE LIKE A WAR GAME THAN YOUR TYPICAL MMORPG, PLAY AGAINST OPPOSING FACTIONS ONLINE"


eMag

DEVIL KINGS



"THE ACTION EXPLODES ON SCREEN WHEN AWESOME CRITICAL MOVES ARE PERFORMED ON THE BATTLEFIELD AS PLAYERS PLOUGH THROUGH ENEMY HORDES"
SAM BRACE, UK PR MANAGER, CAPCOM

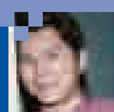
VIDEOGAMES MATHS

A RIGHT ROYAL RIOT

DYNASTY WARRIORS 4 + CAMERA x DEVIL MAY CRY = DEVIL KINGS

■ Despite being somewhat haywire, the in-game camera steps on from *Dynasty Warriors.*

DEVIL KINGS
PLAYSTATION2



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Prior to his role as producer on *Devil Kings*, Hiroyuki Kobayashi worked on some of Capcom's most successful titles. Recent projects include *killer7* and the GameCube's *Resident Evil 4*, while he can count *Devil May Cry, Resident Evil, Resident Evil 2* and the *Dino Crisis* series among previous works.

HISTORY



- **KILLER7 2005** [Multi]
- **RESIDENT EVIL 4 2004** [GameCube]
- **DEVIL MAY CRY 2001** [PlayStation2]



Big, meaty weapons and plenty of explosive effects… it can only be a Capcom game.

The combat is suitably refined, despite appearing to be nothing more than button bashing.

CAPCOM DEBUTS ITS DYNASTY WARRIORS CLONE – A CASE OF BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW?

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: February '06
GENRE: Action Adventure
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Capcom enters the mass combat action genre, giving *Dynasty Warriors* the *Devil May Cry* treatment.

PS2 **One of the joys of language is that what you say and what you mean are often quite different.** A knowing wink here, a quizzical raising of the eyebrow there and the meaning of an entire phrase can be changed completely. Sadly, the written word can make it more difficult to convey your intended tone. We could have started this preview, for instance, by telling you that *Devil Kings* borrows liberally from *Dynasty Warriors*. We might even have proffered that it's heavily and shamelessly influenced by Koei's franchise. But there's always the chance that someone skimming over these words will miss exactly what we mean. So we'll tell it to you straight.

Capcom's epic mass combat actioner is one of the most unashamed, barefaced acts of plagiarism we've seen in some time. To say that *Devil Kings* borrows from *Dynasty Warriors* is a bit like saying that Ronnie Biggs borrowed some money during The Great Train Robbery. Suggesting that the two games resemble each other is akin to implying that there are a few similarities between this year's *Madden* and last. They're practically identical, for god's sake.

With this in mind, you'll already know what to expect from *Devil Kings*. Large-scale battles, boasting impossibly vast hordes of on-screen enemies, merge into sumptuously rendered cut-scenes heralding the arrival of enemy generals, punctuated by a predictable sprinkling of horseback riding. Hacking through hundreds of foot soldiers sees you amass experience points and a hefty arsenal of collectable items while stages are broken up by the same battle map configuration that premiered in *DW4: Empires*. Heck, there's even a Musou meter, though here it's re-christened a Fury meter. Cunning.

So, we can firmly say that *Devil Kings* is unlikely to win awards for originality. In gaming terms, this is hardly reinventing the wheel. But here's the thing – it doesn't matter. Because what *Devil Kings* does reasonably efficiently is correct some of the glitches that persist in Koei's flagship title.

The inclusion of a block command, for example, allows your character to defend itself while immersed in a blood-spattered cloud of enemy troops, helping alleviate your constant reliance on one button to slice your way through the onslaught. Granted, it doesn't provide an impervious means of self-defence, but it should mean less frustration when, having scythed your way through an entire landscape of foes, you're felled by the unavoidable blow of an insignificant foot soldier.

Another oh-so obvious addition is an in-game camera, controlled via the right analogue stick and corrected with the shoulder trigger. It's a little unwieldy but any chance to manually adjust your view of the battlefield is a step up from *Dynasty Warriors*. Equally welcome are landscapes that promise greater topographical diversity than Koei's title, and intricate and thoughtful level design that manages to fling you from a one-on-one encounter to an exhilarating horseback chase and then headlong into the visceral haze of a huge battle, all in one breathless early stage.

If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then *Devil Kings* is a gushing love letter and effusive ode to Koei's genre-defining series. But by ironing out some of the foibles in *Dynasty Warriors*, Capcom's effort might do enough to warm the heart of the most ardent Musou disciple.

CHARACTER ART

Devil Kings **features a cast of superbly designed characters, each lovingly crafted by Makoto Tsuchibayashi, the man responsible for the character design in the original *Devil May Cry*. Though half must be unlocked, the default line-up of six characters boasts a wider variety and stronger individuality than *Dynasty Warriors* manages despite its larger cast. And while the eponymous Devil King is the most striking – wielding both a broadsword and a shotgun – it's his wife who steals the show. Lending credence to the adage that behind every great man stands a greater woman, Lady Butterfly's eye-popping agility and deadly skill with a pair of revolvers make Dante look like a novice.**

> "DEVIL KINGS IS UNLIKELY TO WIN MANY AWARDS FOR ORIGINALITY. IN GAMING TERMS, AFTER ALL, THIS IS HARDLY REINVENTING THE WHEEL"

CRASHDAY



Some beefy weaponry brings in other new ways to cause absolute damage.

Crashday's track editor software makes almost any crazy track design possible.

> "BLENDING THE CLASSIC STUNTS AND THE WRECKING GAME CARMAGEDDON, CRASHDAY IS AN EXTRAORDINARY AND VARIETAL DRIVING GAME"
> ATARI PRESS RELEASE

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

UNDER THE BONNET OF ATARI'S MEAN MACHINE

BURNOUT REVENGE x TRACKMANIA x DESTRUCTION DERBY = CRASHDAY





DEVELOPER PROFILE

Working out of Hamburg, Germany, Moon Byte – in its own words – "Specialises in making unique and impressive computer games for the international entertainment industry." Scoring a publishing deal with Atari for its first major release, *Crashday* is a great result for the fledgling developer.

HISTORY

CRASHDAY is Moon Byte's first title

CAR-CRASH GAMING, BUT IN A GOOD WAY

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Atari
DEVELOPER: Moon Byte Studios
RELEASE: February '06
GENRE: Driving
PLAYERS: 1 (2-TBC Online)

CONCEPT

Take your high-performance car around a track like you might expect, or strap Gatling guns and rockets to it and blow the hell out of everyone. Decisions, decisions…

Famously once the home of strategy games and FPSs, the PC is playing host to more traditionally console-esque games and genres. Be it because PC gamers are tired of playing the same WWII RTS with a different name umpteen times or the fact that consoles are catching up with computers in terms of both technology and software, the times they're a'changing. With games like *Pro Evo*, *Fahrenheit* and *Need For Speed* all finding their way onto expensive gaming rigs, it's only natural for new releases to embrace the changes and take console-style games to the dizzy heights of PC exclusivity.

Effectively slotting itself somewhere betwixt a role as the PC's answer to *Burnout* and a pretender to *Trackmania's* stunt driving crown, *Crashday* is bursting with play modes that range from simple races to *Twisted Metal*-style arena battles. Moon Byte has also plundered modes and options from a variety of genres and adapted them for its cause. Modes like Hold The Flag and Pass The Bomb might not be what you'd expect of a racer but then *Crashday* as a whole can be described in just the same way – leaping from an emphasis on speed to a destructive focus in a few mouse clicks, this is as schizophrenic a racer as you've ever seen. And with the game's career mode incorporating all these styles of play, you'll need to hone your skills in every aspect in order to progress.

And with progress comes many an upgrade, boosting your performance and your capacity for destruction. Engine kits and spoilers are commonplace in racing titles but rockets and mini-guns slightly less so – bolting on high-impact weaponry won't help your cause in normal races, but arena matches will become that bit easier with the help of ranged attacks. Above all, *Crashday* is great fun. It's quick, varied and exciting and while you'll need something of a beast of a PC to make it look (and play) its best, the game is carving its own niche amid a sea of more single-focused racers.

But is Moon Byte's jack-of-all-trades racer spreading itself too thin? With so many bases covered, it remains to be seen whether the game can maintain the same degree of entertainment over sustained play. We hope it can, we really do – what we've played is easily as enjoyable as any other PC racer. And though *Carmageddon* is cited as an influence, there isn't a 'zombie' in sight. Probably a good thing.

With a few months before *Crashday* hits the shelves, several issues could do with being addressed. The scoring system for the stunt modes seems somewhat arbitrary, rewarding flips, spins and crashes over which the player has little control, and throwing multipliers at you for seemingly everything. And, given that most peripheral components get ruined after the first big smash, it becomes tricky to score the big points unless your debut stunt is an absolute beauty. With just minor problems thus far, it's fair to say that we've a definite soft spot for *Crashday*. Let's hope that Atari isn't coaxing us over a spiked pit covered in leaves like it did with the early *Driv3r* presentation…

> "MOON BYTE HAS PLUNDERED MODES AND OPTIONS FROM A VARIETY OF GENRES"

COURSE YOU CAN

As is becoming an increasingly popular feature, *Crashday* will ship with its own editor software for creating tracks, arenas and circuits for you to tear up or tear down at your leisure. While hardly the world's most technical editor, it does allow for an almost infinite variety of parks and courses to be created, with many parts that can be linked in impressive and massively dangerous ways in order to keep both player and crowd happy. Half-pipes, crazy banked curves, launchers and all manner of corkscrews and loops will be familiar enough to *Trackmania* players, but the scope for what you can do within the arenas once they're completed is what makes *Crashday's* creation options sufficiently different.



Looks pretty calm down there, doesn't it? Not that you'll notice when it's whizzing by…

SENSIBLE SOCCER

"GOAL-SCORING SUPERSTAR HERO…"

PS2 **The superiority of *Pro Evolution Soccer* is rarely questioned in gaming circles.** Very few would have the nerve to argue the case for *FIFA* or *This Is Football*, for fear of a severe beating from *Pro Evo's* devout fan base. However, there's one title that always sneaks into the debate and manages to hold its own – nobody ever questions *Sensible Soccer*.

Back in its early-Nineties heyday, 'Sensi' was untouchable. The streamlined recreation of a depiction of football created by Kick Off, coupled with Sensible Software's unique brand of personality and humour was enough to ensure its place in gaming's hall of fame. So good, in fact, that the news of a remake seems slightly ludicrous. What exactly can be done to improve an almost faultless videogame?

The answer, it would seem, is 'not a lot'. Obligatory 3D graphics are in place, now boasting little cel-shaded players with big cel-shaded heads. Quite why cel-shading is necessary when the camera is still (thankfully) zoomed right out we don't know, but at this stage it looks like *Sensi* and that's what's important. There would be nothing worse than a *Sensible Soccer* game with meticulously recreated player models and dynamic stadium lighting. Well, that's not exactly true – after all, *Marvel Nemesis* exists and that's as bad as it gets – but you get the idea.



A part of us is crying on the inside… and yet the rest of us wants this to be so awesome, we'll play it forever more.

The crux of *Sensible Soccer* is the gameplay. Codemasters promises that the new version has captured its predecessor's unique brand of footballing action; memories of 40-yard curlers and rampant 50-yard dribbles are already flooding back. But do we really need a brand new version to score the same goals we were scoring ten years ago? Even if the game plays as smoothly as ever, there's little to suggest that Harry Football should buy it over the latest *PES*. The original is available as a TV plug and play and the new version's lack of *SWOS*-style management options borders on the criminal.

So, who exactly will go for this '*Sensible Soccer* for a new generation?' It's unlikely that the casual market will buy into anything with a name as stupid as *Sensible Soccer* (if you don't know WHY it's called what it's called, it's an incredibly silly name). Will the original's fans be prepared to pay out for an update of an already perfect game? We shall have to wait and see…

"CODEMASTERS HAS PROMISED THAT THE NEW VERSION CAPTURES ITS PREDECESSOR'S UNIQUE BRAND OF FOOTBALLING ACTION"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS2, PC, Xbox
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: Kuju
RELEASE: Q2 '06
GENRE: Sports
PLAYERS: TBA

CONCEPT

A current-gen remake of the classic, with 3D graphics and big old heads.



The classic 'zoomed out' camera is still in place. Player detail would just feel wrong.


eMag

THE OUTFIT



"THE OUTFIT GIVES GAMERS THE FREEDOM TO SHOOT, BLOW UP OR DEMOLISH ANYTHING IN THE WORLD"
THQ PRESS RELEASE

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

ART OF WAR

BATTLEFIELD 2 + BATTALION WARS + RON PERLMAN = THE OUTFIT

■ If you can't go over it and you can't go under it, best shoot it and carry on.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ The Canadian-based Relic cut its development teeth on the critically acclaimed *Homeworld*. It achieved commercial success in 2004 with *Warhammer: 40,000 Dawn Of War* and is now heading into the next generation with *The Outfit*.

HISTORY

- **WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR** 2004 [PC]
- **HOMEWORLD 2** 2003 [PC]
- **HOMEWORLD** 1999 [PC]



■ Ah, comedy Germans – they never grow old. It's like *'Allo 'Allo* all over again…

■ It looks loud and bright and is structured in a very similar way to *Battlefield 2*.

"YOU CAN'T GIVE THE ENEMY A BREAK. SEND HIM TO HELL"

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Relic
RELEASE: March '06
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-8 Online)

CONCEPT

■ An all-action Battlefield-'em-up, with a cartoony World War II setting, superb physics and a unique destruction-on-demand gameplay mechanic.

Keen observers of videogame culture may have noticed the latest trend in war-based videogaming. Blame *Battlefield* if you must, but there's a definite inevitability about the future of shooters, and for the next year, or maybe longer, gamers are going to become very well acquainted with the concept of 'conquest'. The capture of enemy strongholds and territory – be it online or off – will account for far more victories in the coming months than simply out-shooting your foe.

With *The Outfit*, Relic has firmly set out its stall. Fully aware that the game's structure bares a strong resemblance to *Battlefield 2*, instead of hiding its influences, it wears them proudly on its highly decorated sleeves. As you may have gathered, then, the game focuses on the seizure of enemy positions – your own Allied troops in conflict with the Nazis for control of the map. Each level hosts multiple strongholds which can be captured and, in turn, utilised as spawn points should your character bite the bullet, and the more points you have in your possession, the more likely a victory. It's a simple structure that works extremely well in single-player and online multiplayer, and allows those lacking in *Halo 2*–style lightning-quick reactions to use a degree of strategy to succeed.

So, the overall structure of *The Outfit* may be similar to that of *Battlefield*, but that's where the similarities end. The setting is pure simulacra; a boorish, cartoon representation of World War II, constructed with vibrant, colourful textures, an almighty draw distance and inhabited by characters who dangerously tread the thin line between pitifully clichéd and amusingly ironic. Taking control of one of the three COs of *The Outfit* allows for different tactics to be employed. Take JD Tyler (the token African American lead), and you're in pure *Sniper Elite* territory, with a long-range rifle and shotgun for company. Deuce Williams is the ballistics expert, and Mr Tommy Mac deals hot death with an enormous flamethrower. The character design is uninspired, but the voice acting (including Ron Perlman as Williams) is strong, giving the leads a sorely needed injection of personality.

But *The Outfit* isn't about plot and characterisation; it's about causing as much mayhem and destruction as possible and using the power of the 360 to really let players run riot. The environments are entirely destructible; driving tanks though walls, blowing up enemy bases with explosives, even calling in an air strike to demolish a bridge, it's all possible, and gives the world a solidity and consistency that we should begin to take for granted with the next generation.

During our time with an almost complete build of *The Outfit*, the game's Multiplayer mode was also available for play and is shaping up to be an excellent addition to the Xbox Live canon. Using the aforementioned *Battlefield* dynamic, players can select their CO and call in reinforcements using the Destruction On Demand menu – this means that an eight-player match can have up to 40 soldiers running around its environment. It's suitably hectic, with vehicles, debris and bodies flying around the screen, but at this stage, it has the lag to match its carnage. If Relic wants *The Outfit* to rise to the top of the online ranks, then it must surely neutralise this most basic of threats.

> "INSTEAD OF HIDING ITS BATTLEFIELD INFLUENCES, IT WEARS THEM PROUDLY ON ITS HIGHLY DECORATED SLEEVES"

PAY AND DESTROY

***The Outfit's* USP is its Destruction On Demand system, which allows players to airdrop anything from a troop of grunts to a tank onto the battlefield and deploy them for immediate use. In this respect, the game takes on an RTS slant; choosing the best vehicles and artillery for each situation is paramount, but it's more of case of 'what is needed RIGHT now' than 'what will be needed in ten minutes'. Of course, calling in supplies drains resources (or Field Points), so it's not possible to drown the play area in tanks – intelligent support selection is the order of the day.**

TOKOBOT

IT'S A MINI ADVENTURE

These miniature mechs are charming citizens for the portable console.

Ever since we caught a glimpse of *Tokobot* (otherwise known as *Karakuri* in Japan) at this year's Tokyo Game Show, we've been more than a little intrigued by Tecmo's PSP puzzler. With the first anniversary of Sony's handheld fast approaching, and a frustrating dearth of truly unoriginal titles available on the platform, could this colourful brainteaser represent a hidden gem amid a sea of uninspiring ports and hasty knock-offs? And more importantly, what the hell is this bizarre game actually about?

Thankfully, we're starting to get some answers. The impossibly cute mechanised dolls of the game's title are actually the remnants of an ancient civilisation, unearthed thousands of years later by Bolt, a young archaeologist and your character in the game's fantasy world of Moritari. There follows a string of fantastically far-fetched waffle, all of which culminates in a predictable scenario: you're charged with saving the world, and only the Tokobots can help.

If the story doesn't immediately suggest a classic, the in-game action is much more promising. Using your robotic minions to help you navigate the ruins of this prehistoric empire, *Tokobot* boasts that winning mix of platforming and puzzle solving that's so perfectly suited to gaming on the go. As you progress through Moritari's vibrant landscapes, you'll encounter a collection of kooky enemies and environmental puzzles and you'll have to configure your robotic assistants into an appropriate formation in order to overcome these obstacles.

The Tokobots follow you in one of three basic configurations – a V-shaped vanguard ahead of you, a circle around you, or assembled in a line behind you – though progressing through the intricately constructed, fiendishly tricky levels demands much more than simply switching between these formations. The technological little marvels can hover to support you between jumps, merge together to form ladders, and spread out either side of you to perform a windmill attack. Most exciting of all is the prospect of the tiny critters combining into an assortment of massive mechs – think smaller, more cuddly versions of the Transformers' Devastator – to help you conquer bosses and reach remote areas.

An enchanting cocktail of simple, striking colours and weird and wonderful ideas, it's not hard to be excited about Tecmo's first foray into PSP gaming. And though *Tokobot* looks a little too wacky to appeal to the majority of the system's owners, its quirky charm looks certain to provide an original treat for those of us in the know.

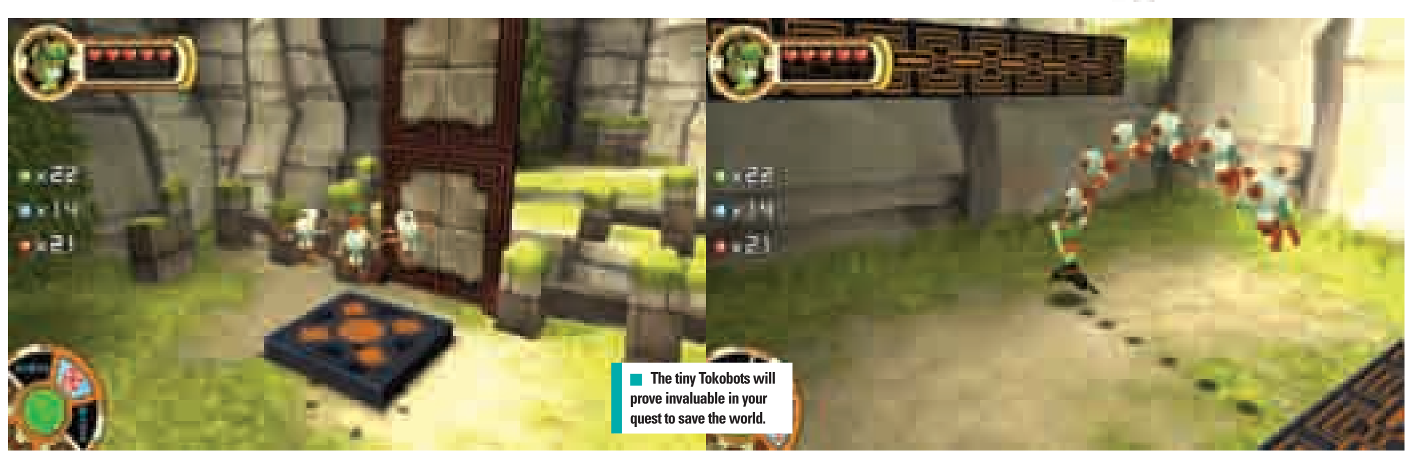
"AN ENCHANTING COCKTAIL OF SIMPLE, STRIKING COLOURS AND WONDERFUL IDEAS"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation Portable
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: TBA '06
GENRE: Puzzle Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

One of the few genuinely original IPs to hit the platform, Tecmo's first PSP offering is a puzzling affair, placing you in charge of an army of tiny robots.



The tiny Tokobots will prove invaluable in your quest to save the world.


eMag

BLACK



A shooter that goes back to basics and concentrates on the actual shooting. Genius?

"UP, LEFT, RIGHT, DOWN, SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT"

PS2 **There's much misplaced enthusiasm in the games industry.** At times, it can be beyond cringe-worthy listening to misinformed lies about how good a clearly rubbish game is, but when you work for one of the country's leading developers you have grounds to be into what you do. Everyone at Criterion seems enthusiastic about whatever it is they're working on and *Black* producer, potty mouth and all-round nice chap Jeremy Chubb is no exception.

While the game hovers on a tantalising title screen mere feet away from us, Chubb recounts at length a 'research' session on a US gun range. He then reels off a list of letters and numbers – a catalogue of guns to put the arsenal of even the most concise shooter to shame. "We want it to be that when you play *Black*, you feel like you've never fired a gun in a game before," explains Chubb, quickly showing us around the game before handing over the pad. "What does *Black* do better than any other shooter? Simple – shooting." And as the first few rounds are spent, we start to see what he means. Before *Black*, we *had* never really fired a gun before.

Black's weaponry is impressive and believable on many levels. On the simplest, every gun really looks the part. Chunky and detailed, every aspect – from case ejection to recoil and reload animations – has been meticulously crafted. And then there are the effects, booming and authentic as can be. *Black* is a game to be played at ear-splitting volume and be it a grenade going off behind you, several minutes of relentless heavy machine gun fire or the whoosh of an incoming missile, each sound is as impressive as it is terrifying. But the finest aspect is the actual repercussions. So accustomed are we to the usual bullet hole decals that fade over time that *Black* just blew us away. Bursts of bullets send dust and debris flying, explosives take out entire sections of buildings and you'll have a hard time trying to take cover when everything you see can be shot and blown to bits.

"*Black* is a fast, accessible roller coaster of insane f***ing destruction," Chubb tells us as we're flinging clip after clip of SMG ammo down a road teeming with enemies – once again, our man is entirely correct. 'Relentless' is the word that best describes *Black*. Foes pour into the area from street corners and buildings while when you get inside, every stairwell or corridor seems packed with people to kill in horrible ways. And they're not stupid either, trapping you in pincer movements and taking the high ground advantage wherever possible. Quite surprising is the juxtaposition of realistic elements – settings and weapons, for instance – and the more over-the-top elements such as massive ammo clips and some Hollywood deaths. "The fantastical stuff has to be in there – it's a videogame, after all," explains Chubb.

Rather than throw hundreds of ideas at *Black* and hope that some stick, Criterion has stripped the shooter genre back to its bare bones. "If you look at any successful game, they do one thing particularly well," Chubb tells us. "*Burnout* does driving really f***ing fast and *Metal Gear Solid* owned stealth for a long time." So wave goodbye to squad controls, bullet time and such frivolous features – if you want big guns and lots of things to destroy, your search begins and ends with *Black*. Dripping with the level of polish Criterion has made its trademark, this is the sort of game to make next-gen naysayers grin from ear to ear. "PS3? Awesome. Xbox 360? Can't f***ing wait. Do we want to be there with *Black*? I don't think so," Chubb concludes. "If we needed to use that extra power, we would."

"CRITERION HAS STRIPPED THE SHOOTER GENRE BACK TO ITS BARE BONES"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
OTHER: Xbox
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Criterion Software
RELEASE: February '06
GENRE: Shoot-'Em-Up
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Gun porn of the highest order. Plenty to kill and lots of ways to do it, *Black* is an explosive adrenaline rush on a disc, that makes your Xbox or PlayStation2 do a very good impression of an Xbox 360.

NONE MORE BLACK

Like with most games, you'll be able to scrape through *Black* without showcasing any serious skill. But the game will laugh at you. So will we. For the more advanced player, Criterion's most ambitious project yet is all about Black Ops kills – anything remotely spectacular is usually rewarded with these bonuses. Headshots, long-range kills and environmental deaths such as getting masonry to crush a group of guards are all celebrated by way of Black Ops bonuses. How these will be integrated into game progression is still being established, but it will be possible to clear each level with as many Black Ops kills as there are enemies. Question is, are you that good?



DEVELOPER PROFILE

We love Criterion. The Guildford-based developer has been at the forefront of the British development scene this generation and hasn't slipped up – not even once. Its Renderware technology is employed by a massive percentage of today's releases.

HISTORY

- **BURNOUT REVENGE** 2005 [Multi]
- **AIRBLADE** 2001 [PlayStation2]
- **BURNOUT** 2001 [Multi]

You can do significant environmental damage with the aid of falling massonry. Stragglers beware.

"BLACK IS A FAST AND ACCESSIBLE ROLLER COASTER OF INSANE F*ING DESTRUCTION"**
JEREMY CHUBB, PRODUCER, CRITERION

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

"HOW MUCH MORE BLACK COULD IT BE?"

GUNS + MORE GUNS x LOTS OF GUNS = BLACK

Weapons are meticulously detailed and everything from the animation to the sound effects are spot on.

LORD OF THE RINGS: BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II



Troops can now come by ship too, making for some fierce naval battles.

Where the first *Battle For Middle Earth* saw you in action on the fields from the movies, this time you'll be heading north.

"THE GAME WILL INTRODUCE PLAYERS TO DEPTHS OF THE FICTION NEVER BEFORE EXPLORED BY EA"
PRESS RELEASE, EA

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

WHAT ARE YOU TOLKIEN ABOUT?

SUPER-UNITS + GOLLUM x RISK = BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II

LORD OF THE RINGS: BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II

PC



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Electronic Arts' Los Angeles-based in-house development studio EALA is responsible for the original *LOTR* RTS game released last year. In 2003 it merged with Westwood Studios, which rose to fame after creating the *Command & Conquer* series. Many *C&C* veterans are now hard at work on this game.

HISTORY

■ GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT 2004 [Multi]
■ LOTR: BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH 2004 [PC]
■ MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT 2004 [PC]



■ It all looks lush – we just hope it can match the high gameplay standards of the original.



AN ALL-NEW LICENCE EXPANDS THE SCOPE OF EA'S LATEST TOLKIEN RTS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: EA Los Angeles
RELEASE: Q1 '06
GENRE: RPG
PLAYERS: 1 (Online 2-8)

CONCEPT

■ New battlefields, new heroes, new monsters and new strategic decisions face players in Electronic Arts' latest franchised *Lord Of The Rings* fight-fest.

With *Battle For Middle Earth*, EA's first foray into the realms of the Tolkien RTS, the spotlight was on recreating the epic nature of Peter Jackson's trilogy. The game was successful in that it provided a solid strategy experience – with suitably grandiose visuals – in which players could embark on good or evil campaigns across such scarred battlefields as Minas Tirith, Helm's Deep and the Plains of Gondor.

EA has landed an expanded licence for the sequel enabling it to tackle Middle Earth scenarios not linked to the films, thereby offering greater creative scope. But rather than re-imagine the franchise, EALA is building on the look and feel of the movies to pursue stories as yet untold in videogame form. The main focus of *Middle Earth II* is on battles alluded to in the books, which deal mostly with the war in the north between Sauron's minions and the united forces of dwarves and elves. This will bring forth new units, locations and heroes for players to exploit in the name of victory.

Offering 16 missions split equally between the sides of good and evil, *Middle Earth II* introduces a number of new and refined mechanics in an effort to formulate a more engrossing sense of strategy. One key addition is a new turn-based campaign game that sits above the main skirmishes. Entitled The War Of The Ring, this *Risk*-like endeavour enables players to move units across the map in a conquering swoop, much like the map-based arena in Creative Assembly's *Total War* series. Each turn is split into three distinct phases: Planning, Conflict and Conflict Resolution. In the first, players can move armies around the map, fortify HQs and strengthen defences of key districts. If forces are moved into enemy areas, the second phase is where the action lies. Here, the choices are to retreat, fight out the battle in real time or let the game juggle the numbers and automatically resolve the battle for you. A bit like *Championship Manager* with Orcs.

Of course, EALA is also enhancing the main RTS game with new features. Naval units have been added to enable players to fight it out on the gloriously rendered seas. Fortress construction has been overhauled to enable buildings to be placed independently in any legal space on the map, and crucial defensive areas can be reinforced with walls, towers, scalding oil pits and other brutal but efficient deterrents.

Gollum's role has been given a greater significance. At the start of each mission, the ugly chap is sent to scamper around the map clutching the infamous One Ring. Once either side discovers him, the Ring falls into the victor's possession and lets the construction of a dominating super-unit in the form of Sauron (for evil-doers) or Galadriel (for forces of good). However, as this hero is being built, the opposing side can rediscover Gollum and recruit him to sneak into enemy territory and steal back the Ring, tipping the scales in their favour.

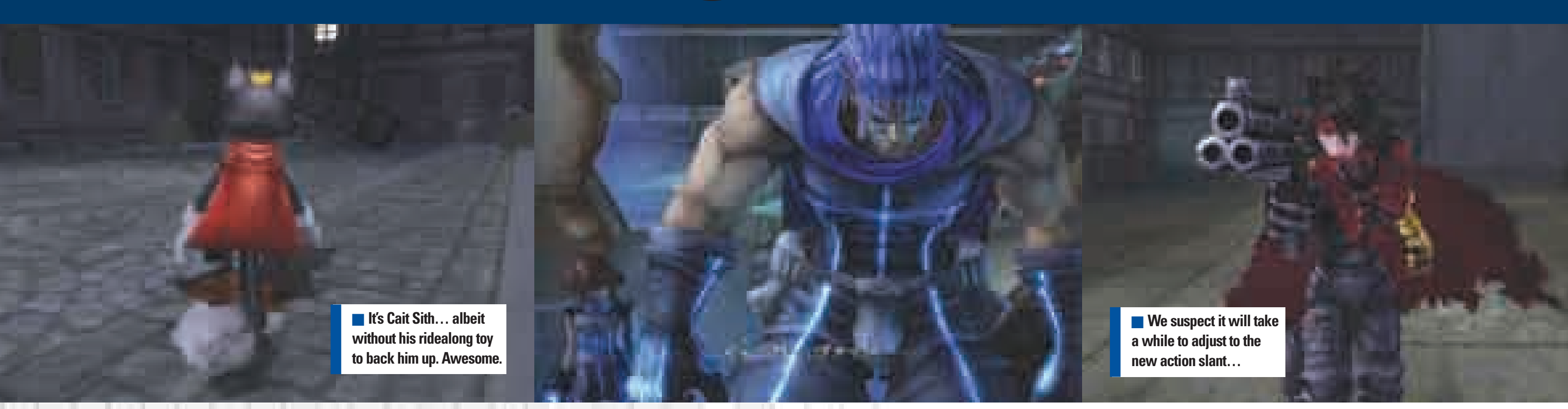
Of course, there's a danger that these heroes could sway the tide of conflict in favour of whoever happens to hold the Ring, which could mean that games shift from careful army strategy to a more random and ultimately boring Gollum-hunt across acres of scorched Middle Earth. Its success will be revealed on release early next year, with a playable demo due to hit the net very soon.

> "ONE KEY ADDITION IS A NEW RISK-LIKE TURN-BASED CAMPAIGN GAME THAT SITS ABOVE THE MAIN SKIRMISHES"

HOLLYWOOD TALENT

The first *Battle For Middle Earth* game was closely tied to the film trilogy, so it was to be expected that Electronic Arts drafted in actors involved in the series to voice the lines of key characters. However, things are bit different this time around. Instead of having a huge line-up of stars on hand to inject the game with personality, EALA has recruited just one: elf-king Elrond – aka Hugo Weaving – who provides narrator duties for the single-player campaign. But to ensure that the look and feel of the game remains true to the movies, trilogy concept artist John Howe has been brought on board to lend a hand in designing new units, heroes, monsters and landscapes.

DIRGE OF CERBERUS: FINAL FANTASY VII



■ It's Cait Sith… albeit without his ridealong toy to back him up. Awesome.

■ We suspect it will take a while to adjust to the new action slant…

REPLACE THOSE FLOWERS WITH GUNS AS VALENTINE'S DAY DAWNS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: TBA 2006 (US: Q1 '06)
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1 (2-20 Online)

CONCEPT

■ Yet another spin-off from the *Final Fantasy VII* legacy, this time featuring the oh-so-Dante-esque Vincent Valentine… oh, and guns. Lots of guns.

PS2 **Opening that coffin for the first time was a spine tingling moment in *Final Fantasy VII*.** Half expecting a boss to jump out and slaughter our entire team we were, instead, confronted with a sleek hidden character toting an automatic pistol. Dressed to kill in a crimson cloak, Vincent Valentine oozed cool from the moment his pale, pixelated face appeared on our screens, and now Square has decided to implement the immortal one into the final segment of its upcoming *Final Fantasy VII* trilogy. Set three years after the original game, *Dirge Of Cerberus* focuses on Vincent and his involvement with a mysterious new faction called the Deepground Soldiers.



"IT'S THIRD-PERSON SHOOTING IN THE FINAL FANTASY VII WORLD – A CURIOUS MIXTURE, INDEED"

What makes this stand out from all the other *Final Fantasy* games however, is the fact that it's not a traditional RPG – its gameplay primarily revolves around third-person shooting with only a hint of RPG action.

Dirge Of Cerberus feels like some kind of *Devil May Cry* and *Resident Evil 4* hybrid, yet still looks set to retain that certain *Final Fantasy* magic. It also maintains its relevance to the story, if by slightly darker means. Cerberus is a mythological dog that supposedly guards the entrance to Hades, and was also a rock-hard late level boss in *FFIX*. Whether Square Enix will break more traditions by putting him in the game remains to be seen, however.

What we have seen so far is Vincent armed with a multitude of weaponry, from rapid machine guns to steady rifles and, of course, his classic pistol. Even the monster-transforming limit breaks have made a comeback with devastating attacks at their disposal. Most of the enemies on the receiving end of Valentine's assaults are your bog standard guards as well as the occasional boss. One cut-scene involves Vincent soaring next to a huge airship while blasting at it in mid-air, whereas another section has him firing long range at a helicopter. Back on ground level though, freeing civilians on the gritty streets seems an integral part of the game.

With an online gunfight mode and familiar characters such as Yuffie and Cait Sith making an appearance, *Dirge Of Cerberus* looks all the more promising. If it can avoid being just another shoot-'em-up while offering fresh and invigorating experiences, there's no reason why this can't be one of next year's leading shooters.



■ In true Square-Enix style, the game is looking lovely – we just hope it plays as well.


eMag

SEEING IS BELIEVING

FORBIDDEN

SIREN 2

PS2 **There has been a fair amount of change within the survival horror genre of late.** Gone are the days when a spattering of pixilated blood and a dog breaking through a window were enough to entertain; now we demand a little more for our buck and, fortunately, developers are keen to meet the demand. *Resident Evil 4* showed us a new way to enjoy horror – desperately searching for ribbons wasn't necessary and ammo was far more plentiful than we'd previously experienced. This was horror action, and most – including us – were more than pleased with the results. There is another side to it though, as great as a spot of action is, a bit-bigger-than-normal centipede/bat/villager is never going to cause as much of a stir as some of the more psychological titles available, and a fine example of this is *Forbidden Siren*.

Creepy, atmospheric and plainly horrific at times, *Forbidden Siren* treated us to something even more disturbing than the *Silent Hill* games – and also presented some of the worst voice acting we'd ever punished our ears with. "The plan for the next version will be to have English subtitles and to leave all the Japanese in," Keiichiro Toyama, product developer at Sony reassures us with a smile. He knows. Yes, definitely. He's more than aware that zombies and victims alike shouldn't have sharp Mockney accents – the sole element that destroyed the first title for us – and we couldn't be happier that it won't be causing any damage to the atmosphere of the upcoming *Forbidden Siren 2*.

Replacing the offensive voices that we've ridiculed on many occasions are a batch of new features such as a stealth mode and all-new 'sightjacking' powers. These should ensure that the game plays out differently enough to avoid the attention of the innovation police that seems to be on constant patrol since the revolution controller was announced. Still, blood rain and red tsunamis luring people to the netherworld all remind you from where the game has sprung.

Interestingly, although we were quick to separate the *Forbidden Siren* series

"JUST LIKE SILENT HILL USES NOISE TO CREATE TENSION, WE'RE USING VISUALS TO ENHANCE THE FEELING THAT SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN. WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW IS TO WHAT LEVEL OF SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN"
KEIICHIRO TOYAMA, PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, SONY

SIGHT BEYOND SIGHT

Anyone who played through the first title will fondly remember sightjacking. Being able to see what your enemies could see was a great feature and provided a level of tactics that was yet to be sampled in the horror genre. Well, unsurprisingly, the ability will be returning, only this time you'll have a few more tricks up your sleeve. Animals that inhabit the island can also have their eyes 'borrowed', giving you greater opportunity to check out areas around you for danger. One of the characters you play as will be completely blind unless you use the sightjack skill to see what his guide dog is seeing. It's always gratifying when a decent ability is put to good use.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: SCEJ
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: TBA '06 (Japan: February '06)
GENRE: Survival Horror
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Forbidden Siren 2 is set to rattle your nerves once again as you investigate the island of Yamijima and battle a host of new grizzly enemies.

HISTORY

The first *Forbidden Siren* successfully showed us how survival horror should be done. One of the most atmospheric titles of the genre, it was well received despite disappointing voice acting.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Sony really needs no introduction, but the many studios that the giant runs in-house offer enough range to provide quality titles no matter what genre they compete in. This combination of money and talent is certainly good news for games players.

HISTORY

- GOD OF WAR 2005 [PS2]
- FORBIDDEN SIREN 2004 [PS2]
- EYETOY: PLAY 2003 [PS2]

■ Who needs the next generation of consoles when you can be scared witless by the current breed, eh?

from *Resident Evil 4* at the beginning of this piece, there are elements that reveal Sony to be moving with the crowd. The concept of human nature and survival has been concentrated on and enemies take a far more human form than before – perhaps we were too quick to judge. "Certainly, there's some truth to the idea that everyone is trying to put more action into games," Toyama admits. "But it's difficult to make correct comparisons. I think other games are far more action focused, with a more macho, militaristic type of action – while we are focused on the well-rounded storytelling side of things. Creating this unique world, environment and atmosphere is what we are trying to do. There's far more movie making and a sense of Hollywood present in games now, ours is completely different in that respect."

This does remind us of some recent disasters that have come about due to developers buckling under the pressure to deliver what Joe Public wants rather than sticking to their own ideas, but Toyama is quick to let us know that this is not the case this time. "We're responding, in part, to the market because there does need to be some action in a game like this," he tells us. "Otherwise the game will simply not be a success. It won't be enough to just have the atmosphere and this world we've created – action is necessary to continue a popular franchise. We don't want to put too much action in though – it's not an action game and we don't want to lose anything we've worked to create. It certainly shouldn't change what we are focusing on."

And from the sound of things, nothing is going to shift the focus of this team. The words 'atmosphere' and 'our own world' are mentioned so frequently that it's obvious that they know exactly what they want to create and how they intend to go about it. Horror is the name of the game, and we are already well

PEOPLE PERSON

As with the first title in the series, you won't be taking control of just one hero but a whole host of them. There are a number of characters stranded on the island who will all play their own important part in the tale. A pretty mixed bunch they are too: a magazine editor who comes to report on the island's past; a blind novelist and his faithful dog; a fugitive; and a fortuneteller. Looks like we're in for quite a story.

■ Sightjacking's a terrifying thing – if you can see yourself, it's probably time to start running away…

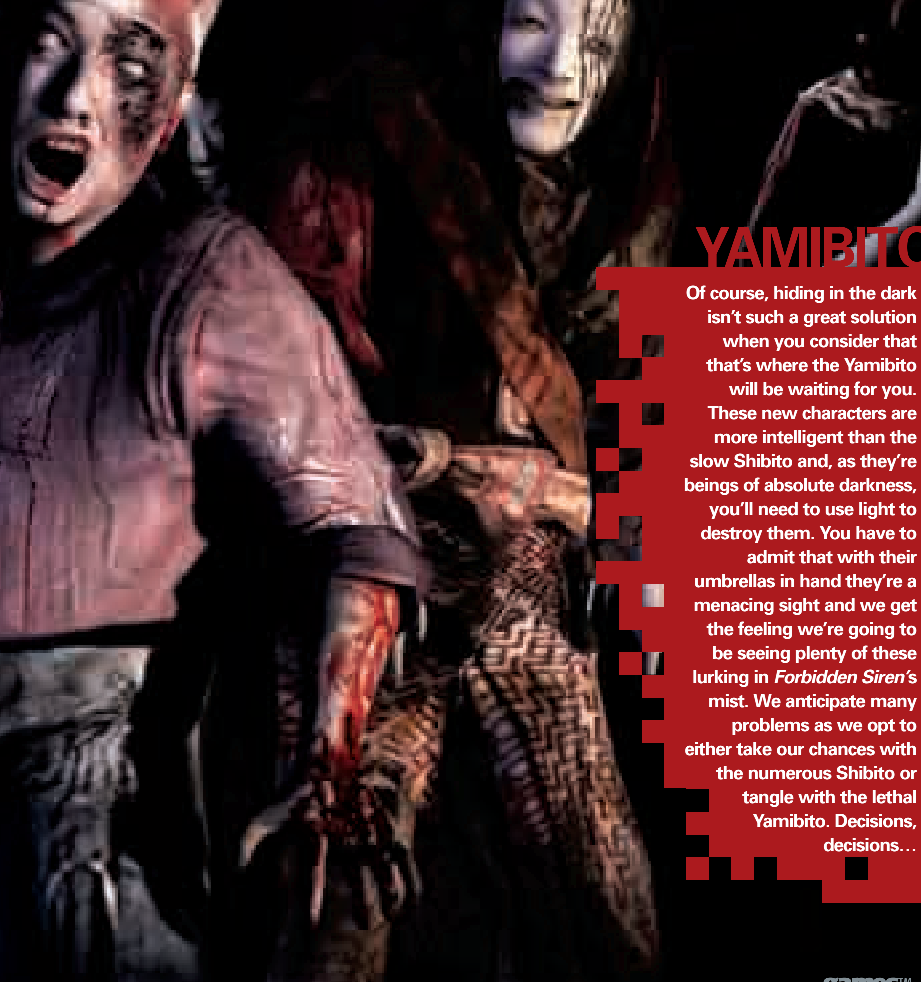
■ The Yamibito aren't exactly the kind of people you'd want to run into… well, anywhere really.





KNOW YOUR ENEMY

If you're unaware of exactly how frightening the world of *Forbidden Siren* is, there's no better way to bring yourself up to speed than to have a peek at the foes that'll be hunting you down and providing the scares. Be warned – they're far from pretty…



SHIBITO

Your standard enemy and the key trouble present in the first title are the Shibito. Lumbering zombie-esque types who wield all manner of weaponry, they're actually far more of an obstacle than an actual foe. As creepy as they look – with their bleeding eye sockets and unnerving movement – they are pretty dumb and pushing them down a well while they investigated a well-placed radio was always highly satisfying before, and we're sure it will be again. That said, you'd be a fool to underestimate them as they have a habit of appearing where you least expect, and with new artificial intelligence in place they're bound to be a little harder to dispose of. The Shibito aren't too fond of the dark though, so at least you'll be able to hide from them if you really need to…

YAMIBITO

Of course, hiding in the dark isn't such a great solution when you consider that that's where the Yamibito will be waiting for you. These new characters are more intelligent than the slow Shibito and, as they're beings of absolute darkness, you'll need to use light to destroy them. You have to admit that with their umbrellas in hand they're a menacing sight and we get the feeling we're going to be seeing plenty of these lurking in *Forbidden Siren*'s mist. We anticipate many problems as we opt to either take our chances with the numerous Shibito or tangle with the lethal Yamibito. Decisions, decisions…



HORROR PROFILE

It sounds strange but we like scaring ourselves. Over the last few years, developers have really shown that videogames are as capable of providing jumps and yelps as any movie, and with the next gen on its way, we can expect far more from the genre.

HISTORY

- RESIDENT EVIL 4 2005 [Multi]
- FORBIDDEN SIREN 2004 [PS2]
- SILENT HILL 3 2003 [Multi]

The shambling Shibito are worth avoiding, but they're nothing compared to the Yamibito.

"WHEN IT COMES TO PLAYABILITY ISSUES, WE'VE PUT A LOT OF WEIGHT ON THE FEEDBACK WE RECEIVED FROM THE FIRST GAME"
KEIICHIRO TOYAMA, PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, SONY

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

EVIL UNLEASHED

FORBIDDEN SIREN x EVIL x FEAR = FORBIDDEN SIREN 2



FORBIDDEN SIREN 2

PLAYSTATION2

It's what you can't see that evokes the most intense dread, and the visuals employed here should create just the tension needed.

aware that they are more than capable of delivering the frights, but how can you be confident that you're going to give the public what they want when tastes are changing so rapidly? It's a known fact that many Japanese titles struggle on these shores due to their 'quirky' nature. "The success of Japanese horror movies in the US and Europe, and the fact that some are even being remade in these countries, demonstrates that the traditional Japanese sense of horror and ghost stories translate well," Toyama explains. "There's certainly no problem there, as we know we can communicate that successfully. Another aspect we are drawing from is not so much the movies – where you see a lot more of the ghosts and spirits – but more from comic book-based horror stories that have been around in Japan for a long time now."

This is good to know. When it comes down to it, no matter what the influences and inspirations, it's how the fear is projected that's going to dictate the success of *Forbidden Siren 2*.

HIDE AND SNEAK

It's almost become a trend – a videogame simply can't exist without some kind of stealth mode. Some certainly work better than others, but Forbidden Siren 2 may have got it just right with its Kagami mode. Unusually, this 'Stealth mode' will allow you to move faster than usual and escape danger a little easier, rather than slowing you to a snail's pace and forcing you to hide behind a crate for ten minutes. Of course, this speed is going to come at a price and it looks like you're going to be even more defenceless than usual while enjoying this swiftness.

"IF THERE'S SOMETHING THAT YOU'D LEFT BEHIND, YOU DIE FEELING INCOMPLETE AND YOU HAVE TO COME BACK AND DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT – LIKE A CURSE"
KEIICHIRO TOYAMA, PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, SONY

Gamers are becoming increasingly sturdy, and opting to shy away from many of the action elements that are currently proving so popular is all well and good as long as you can successfully create the desired atmosphere. "Really, with this title, once something scary comes out of the mist or darkness and is standing right in front of you, it's not scary any more, so we're trying to put emphasis on what can't be seen and what might be out there," Toyama tells us enthusiastically. "That way, players will create what they think is out there themselves to some degree. Just like *Silent Hill* uses noise to create tension, we're using visuals, a sense of shakiness and instability, to enhance the feeling that something is about to happen. What you don't know is to what level that something is going to happen."

It sounds to us as though Sony has some pretty big things planned for *Forbidden Siren 2*, and our knowledge of the previous title backs up these ideas. If everything can be achieved and Toyama manages to conjure up all the emotions that he's hoping for, then we could be looking at yet another twist in the genre – one that's definitely for the better.

SHOWCASE

MORE THINGS TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

THE RUB RABBITS!

SEGA TEACHES US HOW TO RUB IT AGAIN

Format:	Nintendo DS
Origin:	Japan
Publisher:	Sega
Developer:	Sonic Team
Genre:	Party
Players:	1-4



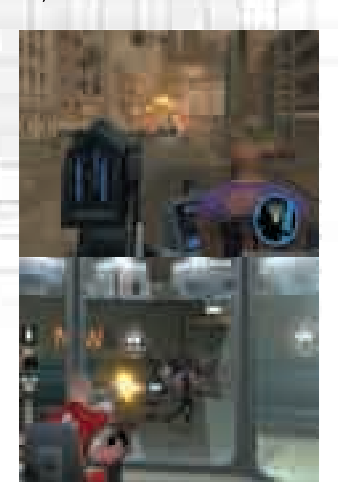
As a tool for showing friends the unique capabilities of your brand spanking new Nintendo DS, *Project Rub* was an outstanding title. As a videogame that lasted only a mere two hours however, it was woefully lacking. Still, *The Rub Rabbits!* comes as an extremely pleasant and innovative surprise. The crazed minds of those guys at Sonic Team have been at it once again, crafting some of the most bizarre and hilarious mini-games that have ever been seen. Thankfully, the all-new 'rub comedy' Story mode is twice as long as that of its unique predecessor, and the inclusion of two-player games – using just the one machine – is a more than welcome feature.

RELEASE: FEBRUARY '06

STATE OF EMERGENCY 2

OOH, LOOK AT THE STATE OF YOU…

Format:	PlayStation2
Origin:	Canada
Publisher:	Playlogic
Developer:	DC Studios
Genre:	Action
Players:	1



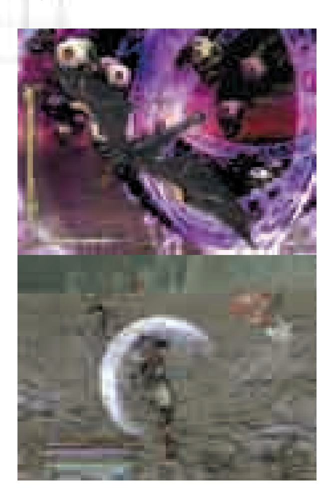
***State Of Emergency 2* had all but disappeared off the radar, however, thanks to Dutch publishing house Playlogic, there will be another chance to get yourself involved with some serious rioting (from the comfort of your armchair) early in the new year.** We weren't the biggest fans of the original *State Of Emergency* back in 2002, so it will be interesting to see if this sequel – now in the hands of VIS and under the control of DC Studios – can prove to be more than just a one-trick pony. With the promise of ground and air-based vehicles as well as the familiar crowd control, things are looking that little bit more interesting this time, but we aren't going to hold out too much hope at this stage.

RELEASE: Q1 '06

DRAKENGARD 2

BURN, BURN, BURN – THE RING OF FIRE

Format:	PlayStation2
Origin:	Japan
Publisher:	Ubisoft
Developer:	Square Enix
Genre:	Action
Players:	1



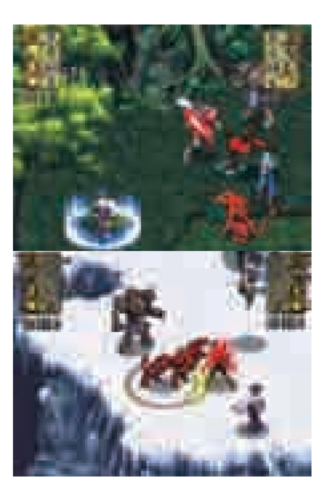
Square Enix's first mix of swordplay and dragon riding may not have fared too well on these shores but Ubisoft has picked up its PlayStation2-bound sequel nevertheless. The game has been out since June in Japan where it has sold superbly, and with promises of an enhanced combat engine and a much-improved character upgrade system, *Drakengard 2*'s prospects are certainly looking up. However, all we really care about is battling gigantic dragons, and luckily, according to all sources there's a significant increase in the fire-breathing action. So, good news then. Whether it will be enough to wrench us away from *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, on the other hand, is a completely different matter.

RELEASE: MARCH '06

MAGE KNIGHT: DESTINY'S SOLDIER

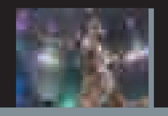
ANOTHER DS ACRONYM…

Format:	Nintendo DS
Origin:	Japan
Publisher:	Namco
Developer:	In-House
Genre:	Strategy
Players:	1



The Nintendo DS is fast becoming the new home of turn-based strategy games. *Advance Wars: Dual Strike* is our highest scoring DS title yet, and Namco's *Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier* looks set to follow in the successful footsteps of Intelligent Systems' title. Based on a popular tabletop game, *Mage Knight* is staying true to its roots, allowing players to physically roll the dice with the stylus and move troops around with ease. It's too early to say whether *Destiny's Soldier* will be able to breach the fickle mainstream gaming consciousness in the same way that *Advance Wars* has, but with a solid engine and particularly pleasing touch screen control, it's certainly in with a fighting chance.

RELEASE: Q1 '06



DELAYED – Dead Or Alive 4 [Xbox 360]

The prettiest of all the fighters has slipped from 'launch day' to 'launch window' – in other words, there's now no confirmed PAL release date for Tecmo's 360-bound brawler. Expect to see it resurface early next year.



DELAYED – Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion [Xbox 360, PC]

It was some people's must-have Xbox 360 launch title, but *Oblivion* has slipped back into early 2006. The official line on why is not yet known, but we'd like to speculate that 2K Games didn't want its key title lost in the launch rush.

MOTORSTORM

BURNING RUBBER, THE NEXT-GEN WAY

Format: PlayStation3
Origin: US
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Evolution Studios
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-TBA



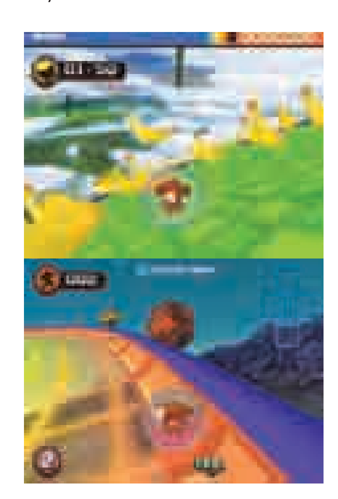
PS3 **Once again, it's time for some more 'is it real or isn't it?' PlayStation3 murmurings, as we take a ganders at Evolution Studios' forthcoming PlayStation3 action racing game, dynamically entitled *MotorStorm*.** The short trailer has been doing the rounds for quite some time now, and it undoubtedly looks stunning; trucks, 4x4s and bikes scream around dirt tracks in glorious high definition. But when it comes down to it, will *MotorStorm* actually resemble this hi-octane footage? This is certainly the sort of quality that should define the next generation of videogaming, if a certain Ken Kuturagi is to be believed. For now though, these screens will only serve as more fuel for the PlayStation3 fire…

RELEASE: TBA '06

SUPER MONKEY BALL TOUCH AND ROLL

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

Format: Nintendo DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-House
Genre: Puzzle
Players: TBA



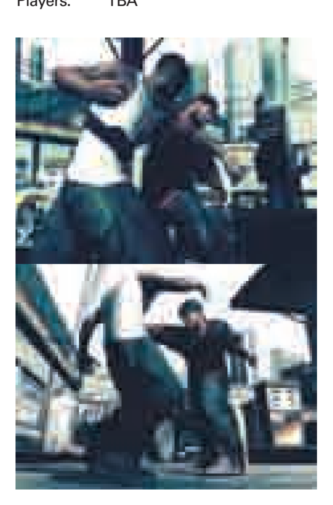
When the Nintendo DS was announced, *Super Monkey Ball* was one of the first concepts to be bandied around as a suitable showcase for the distinctive touch screen feature. It's taken its time to materialise, but Sega has finally got around to showing us its latest piece of portable genius – *Monkey Ball Touch And Roll* is a game that's looking every bit as excellent as it should. The stylus control, while somewhat unwieldy to begin with, becomes second nature within minutes, and those memories of near misses on Expert Stage 7 immediately come flooding back. Playing it on a bumpy bus journey, though, might be a stretch for anyone's patience and sanity. We shall just have to wait patiently to find out.

RELEASE: MARCH '06

DEF JAM 3 [WORKING TITLE]

NO, MR PAUL – WE EXPECT YOU TO DIE

Format: Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: EA Sports Big
Genre: Beat-'Em-Up
Players: TBA



We thoroughly enjoyed *Def Jam: Fight For New York*. As an extrapolation of Aki's sublime wrestling engine (remember *WCW/NWO Revenge*?), it was largely faultless, and so we greet the news of a next-generation sequel with open arms. The roster is currently undisclosed, but one look at the screenshots shows us that everyone's favourite G-Unit… guy, Lloyd Banks, is going to be laying some serious smack down on the competition, and he looks better than ever (not difficult for Banks, to be fair; he was never the most handsome of fellows). Hopefully we'll be able to take our created thugged-out superstar online and destroy Sean Pauls the world over. It's just like a really beautiful dream…

RELEASE: TBA '06

IBARA

SHOOTING THE BREEZE IN AN OLD-FASHIONED STYLEE

Format: PlayStation2
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Taito
Developer: Cave
Genre: Shoot-'Em-Up
Players: 1-2



PS2 **Fans of the lost art of hurtling vertically up a screen, shooting everything and anything that moves, and dodging all manner of debris should rejoice as Cave is back in town with a brand new shoot-'em-up called *Ibara*.** Firmly pitched as an accompaniment to such classic games as *Espgaluda* and *Mushihimesama*, the ever-familiar mix of frantic action and ridiculously overpowered bosses is as appealing as always. With the gameplay focused on 'bomb building' – a similar system to *Battle Garega* – and a harsh levelling system which ups enemy difficulty relative to your own power, *Ibara* is definitely going to be a game for the hardcore purists out there.

RELEASE: TBA '06


CLERIC L 1
16
WIZAR
8



Cleric needs food, badly **The King Of Dragons Arcade [Capcom] 1991**

"The perils of a **virtual currency**… are we



fat of the la

being robbed by the online **merchants?”**

$uburbia, late December 2004: the wait was finally over. David Storey had won. For a paltry $26,500, the Australian student /entrepreneur had bought himself an island of treasures – or, as the auctioneers referred to it, Treasure Island. Fantasies of theme parks, private hunting grounds and beachside resorts ran through Storey's mind as he surveyed the vast landscape to which he now held claim. But here's the catch: Treasure Island didn't exist. It was as real as the sum of the world in which it resided: Calypso, (AKA) MindArk's *Project Entropia*.

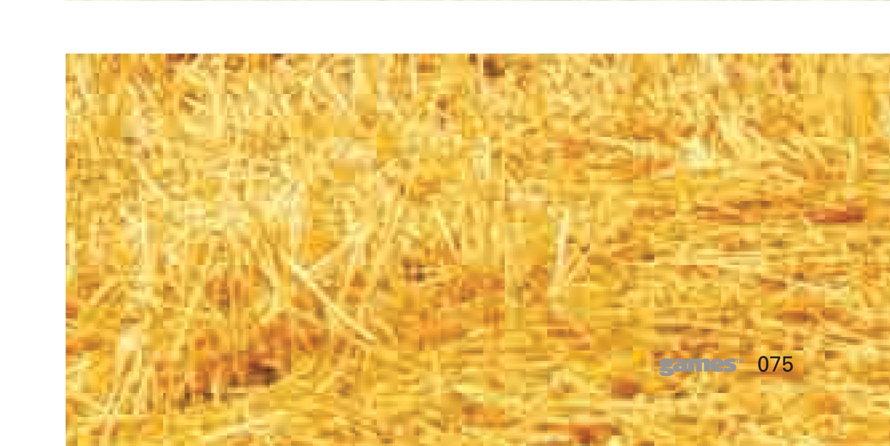
Treasure Island wasn't the only thing in *Project Entropia* for which players paid real money. The game revolves around players investing real cash into their virtual lives, and it's this system that critics and gamers are heralding as the future of Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming (MMOG).

If gamers and critics are convinced, then Jan Welter (MindArk's CEO) is certain. “I was thinking about the possibility of making a virtual world already in the Eighties, when I went to the Chalmers University of Technology,” he explains. “At the time it was an impossible mission to pursue, due to lack of computer power and internet spread. But in 1995, I could see that it would soon be possible to make a virtual world that would be graphically and technically good enough for large numbers of players to enjoy. So I invested my private funds […] into making *Project Entropia*. *Project Entropia* is now merely the beginning of my vision: ‘better than reality in all ways’. And in this spirit, it is evolving and getting better every month.”

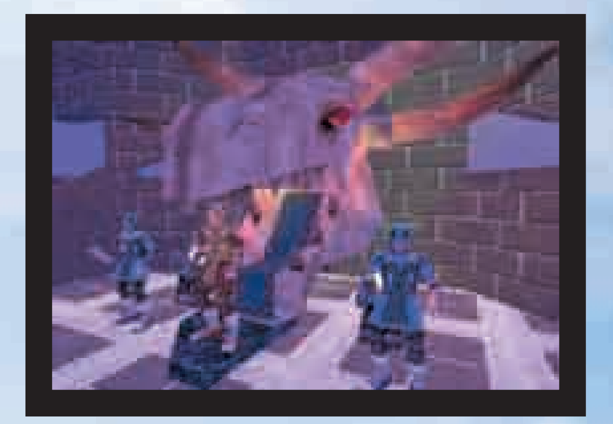
With no subscription fees to cover bills (as is the norm), one wonders when MindArk's flagship will be usurping reality, ‘in all ways’. *Project Entropia*'s real-money system appeals to many players who want to trade virtual items in an open, safe environment. There's no late nights trawling eBay and no bad deals. The biggest surprise? MindArk expects *Project Entropia*'s turnover to be in the realm of $250,000,000 this year.

There are issues with going against the grain however. As Welter puts it, “It is always a problem to introduce a new concept. It takes time and effort to educate the public on the benefits a system like that which Project Entropia brings.” And





fat of the land



Lineage

■ Hugely popular in the Far East, games like Lineage are a prime example of how item farming and other unsavoury acts can get out of hand very quickly indeed.



Tale In The Desert

■ Even smaller and less popular MMORPGs are likely targets for farmers – moreso even, due to there being less chance of being pursued by the developers.

World Of Warcraft

■ The most popular MMORPG on the planet right now, and one that's rife with virtual item sale. Surprisingly, Blizzard isn't planning to regulate it any time soon.

Decisions, Decisions

Not much of a fighter? Swordplay doesn't do it for you? Perhaps you should try *A Tale In The Desert*. Or, if that feels too restrictive, pick up a copy of *Second Life*. As with all popular genres, there's always a reactionary movement, and this time round, the social MMOG is it. Fuelling the fire of those who see MMOGs as 'glorified chat rooms', games like *A Tale In The Desert* and *Second Life* place the emphasis on player interaction over spider-smashin'. However, to view these new titles simply as places where 21st Century Valley Girls can text each other about lip gloss from fantasy castles is selling them short. In *A Tale In The Desert,* for example, players can take part in the creation of a utopian government system by giving politics a go. Alternatively, in *Second Life*, it's not only possible, but extremely easy to forge their very own virtual worlds. So, you know, if orcs ain't your thing…

he's right. Players who've dealt exclusively with subscription-based MMOGs will have a lot of trouble warming to the game's harsh, capitalist reality.

Still, *PE* synthesizes Real-Money Trading (RMT), an activity of which many MMOGs have been a part for a while. From *Ultima Online* through to *Lineage II*, players have been handing over real money for virtual glory. So why haven't developers caught up? Retired *Ultima Online* trader, *Wired* contributing editor, and author of *My Tiny Life*, Julian Dibbell, thinks it's a case of stigma. "There just remains that magical aura of 'play' (although it certainly becomes work) that makes it seem like you always have to be playing the game."

Games, by definition, rarely have anything in common with today's interactive media. Whether you're living the life of Carl Johnson in *GTA: San Andreas* or swashbuckling through the open-ended world of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the goal-orientated nature of 'gaming' doesn't fit. Then again, those titles are, in many ways, 'safe'. When you shut down your PC/PS2/Xbox/GCN, your world returns to normal. However, when currency gets injected, things can go awry.

Dibbell knows this all too well. The most ethically dodgy moment in an MMOG that he remembers is that of the Bone Crusher. "I saw a good deal for this new weapon [the Bone Crusher] that cost a lot of money and was so rare that only one or two are known to exist. We checked with Bob [Kiblinger, owner of uotreasures.com], and he told me he would pay me a lot more for it than this guy, Jammaster, was asking. So I came back the next day, and another guy, Harcourt, had one, and I dealt with him. But he said, "I don't have it anymore. Some guy stole it out of my house." And I asked, "Oh no! What's his name?" It was Jammaster. Bad moment. I thought that I could either buy the ill-gotten goods and make a quick profit, or do the right thing. I sort of passed the buck and checked with Bob as the senior colleague: what would he do? He

"A real-life death **for virtual theft.** Qui's serving a suspended **death sentence**"

said that thieving is part of the game – it's a skill – so it's perfectly fair."

It gets worse. Dibbell's encounter with a virtual thief doesn't compare to the case of the late Zhu Caoyuan. Zhu, 26, was a regular *Legend Of Mir 3* player. A good player. So good, in fact, that he and Qiu Chengwei, 41, jointly won the prestigious Dragon Sabre. Exactly what the purpose was of giving one sword to two players has yet to be explained, but Zhu saw an opportunity to make a lot of cash – USD870, to be precise. So he pawned it without Qiu's consent. In response, Qiu tracked Zhu down to his apartment, and, after some deliberation, fatally stabbed him in the chest. A real-life death for virtual theft. Qiu's now serving a suspended death sentence.

MMOGs, fantastic and unreal as they are, often have very real consequences. And yes, Dibbell did end up buying and selling the Bone Crusher, but not without a healthy serving of guilt. After all, he too had been the victim of virtual theft. There also remains the worrying fact that, because the Bone Crusher could be exchanged for real money, it had a real-world value. Did Dibbell take part in trafficking stolen goods? The answer will always be subjective. But, as they say, it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye.

For some, however, even the basic process of re-selling is neither fun nor games. They consider it anathema. "The negative side is what it does to the economies in the games," Dibbell explains. "That's a sort of un-resolvable issue. But it's pretty plausible that the operations of gold farmers and the like really skew the game's economies so that prices rapidly rise out of the reach of average players."

If there's any type of player that could be almost universally classed as a blight on developers and casual players alike, it would be farmers. Farmers, unlike traders, don't buy and sell goods: they create them.

"All the farmers live a very precarious kind of existence," Dibbell says. He knows because he got to know one: Rich Thurman, or, as Dibbell calls him, 'The 20-Billion-Gold-Piece Man'. By exploiting a bug in *Ultima Online,* Thurman laid claim to almost half of *UO*'s circulating currency (in non-Asian servers). As a consequence, the Britannian





Project Entropia
■ Want a bigger gun? Then you'd better be prepared to pay for it through the nose in cold, hard currency.

The Stars Come Out

You thought MMORPGs were solely the realm of spotty masturbators? Think again, because celebrities are getting in on the online action too. Don't believe us? Check out *EverQuest II* – it currently sports more than four hours of dialogue from Christopher Lee (Saruman, for you *Lord Of The Rings* nuts) and a similar amount from Heather Graham. Beyond that, there's U2's performance in *Second Life*, Gorillaz's world tour in *Habbo Hotel*, and, well, Darth Vader in *Star Wars Galaxies*. The advantage? Like re-selling, celebrities catapult MMOGs into the mainstream, which gives us the opportunity to finally let go of swords 'n' sorcery and be a tad more creative. w00t indeed.

gold piece dropped by 20 per cent. Thurman's account was banned, but not before he did a lot of damage.

There are many undiscovered farmers. In Asia, workers are paid sweatshop rates to monitor *Lineage II*. They're just there to make sure no one finds out. Sony Online Entertainment has always been anti farmers. It's closed eBay accounts and banned gamers, but it couldn't stop RMT. So, recently it opened its doors to cash in the form of *EverQuest 2*'s Station Exchange servers. Players whose RMT had always been discreet, often with some very unscrupulous eBay-ers can now do their dealings in a clean, secure environment.

Even with this clean, free RMT, problems arise: what'll happen to Dibbell's 'magical aura of play'? When RMT comes along, how much of our MMO is 'play' and how much is Wall Street? If we allow re-selling to come into our MMOs, then there'll be a global *Project Entropia* effect – those who just play the game are at a disadvantage to those who hand over the greenbacks. Being able to buy your way to the top makes you wonder why anyone would want to actually do it the hard way. And then, what's the purpose of playing the game?

Steve Sayler, president of the biggest re-seller in the business, IGE, thinks the RMT market enriches player experience in MMOs. "This is a natural consequence of the phenomenal growth of the MMO industry as it gives players the advantage of

fat of the land



Star Wars Galaxies
■ Players can effectively build their own houses within a city, but some people take things too far – decorating a house soon turns into one huge willy-waving contest.

"We find ourselves **engaging in the capitalism** from which we used **to seek refuge**"

greater flexibility so that they can focus on aspects of the game they most enjoy. There's no question that the biggest advantage of the secondary market is that it lets players play the way they want to."

"IGE was founded on the premise of improving gamer services and fostering a more enjoyable gameplay experience," says Sayler. "It understood that facilitating the trading, buying and selling of virtual assets is a valuable service in itself for the MMO community as it not only gives players greater flexibility so they can focus on aspects of the game they most enjoy, but it also allows players to get real-world value for the effort and time they invest in the games. This connection between virtual and real-world economies is the start of the next generation of entertainment that is contextually based and commerce-driven."

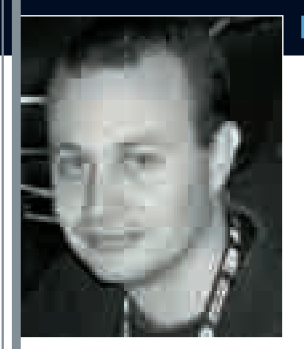
Commerce is becoming a big part of the 'next generation of entertainment'. Where re-selling was once a curiosity, it's now a given. After all, it provides a monetary incentive for slaving away at a virtual character across months and years (and paying for the privilege). The success of IGE has proven this incentive powerful.

How does IGE deal with farmers? Sayler explains his company's position: "IGE does not condone abusive farming practices that undermine the gameplay experience by disrupting games or otherwise diminishing the enjoyment of other gamers. It is important to make a distinction between 'abusive farming' and otherwise responsible farming practices. Players are entirely within their rights to engage in responsible, non-intrusive or disruptive farming whether it's to earn a meaningful real-world return on the time they've invested in the game, or simply to increase trading power for themselves or their guild. In any case, the secondary market was created by gamers because it allows them to play the way they want to play, and responsible farming is a natural extension of the games. However, IGE is committed to working with publishers and the industry as a whole to minimise the impact of abusive farming on the gameplay experience. IGE does buy from suppliers who farm assets, but we make every effort to inform suppliers of our policy regarding the purchase of items that have been accumulated through abusive farming , and we do not hesitate to enforce compliance should we become aware of any supplier who has obtained virtual goods through disruptive methods. We simply will not tolerate abusive farming practices that diminish the gameplay experience, and we do not knowingly buy items from those who engage in those practices."

There are certain high-profile farmers who would disagree with that statement. According to them, IGE relinquishes responsibility for the legality of its suppliers farming practices by looking the other way. There is, of course, no way to test the validity of this accusation.

It seems the MMOGs we once knew have become big business. Their initial purpose was to provide an escapist universe, thoroughly utopian in its intentions (if flawed by jabbering l33t-speaking 13 year olds), so how do we find ourselves emptying our wallets just to engage in the kind of dog-eat-dog capitalism from which we used to seek refuge?

You could argue that this new business is exactly what these games need – it'd attract the players who distanced themselves from MMOGs due to their difficulty. Worlds get bigger, budgets get higher, patches are more frequent. Sure, in the end the power-levelled PKs will probably consume us gamers who play for the fun of it, but at least we'll enjoy the ride.



The Players

AS THE CURTAIN GOES DOWN ON THE FIRST EVER BLIZZCON EVENT, WE TAKE A MOMENT WITH TOM CHILTON, LEAD DESIGNER ON WORLD OF WARCRAFT, TO DISCUSS ALL THINGS BLIZZARD…

TOM CHILTON

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Anaheim, California. Not the most recognisable of towns – although it is famous for Disneyland and the Mighty Ducks – but in October, thousands of light-starved *World Of Warcraft* fans descended on the Anaheim Convention Centre to soak up all things Massively Multiplayer at the inaugural BlizzCon. It's not often that a dev studio can afford to run its own conference. Not often at all. Tom Chilton, though, is more than pleased with how the event's debut went down. "I'm very happy," he beams. "When you throw something like this, you really don't how many people are going to come. We had no idea whether we'd sell out or not."

So what led to this success? After all, we can think of few developers that could get away with throwing such an elaborate shindig. "I think it's the community. There's just a very strong community that has grown around our games," Chilton says. "*Warcraft III* and *Starcraft* are games people are still playing. I mean, *Starcraft* came out in 1998! And now, with *World Of Warcraft*, we have four and a half million players around the world. It's such a strong social game, and BlizzCon is an opportunity for those players to meet and get to know each other, and learn about what we have planned."

Blizzard has tapped into a very specific but very crucial part of the market. It's gaming obsession. "We have a very strong commitment to releasing quality software," Chilton explains, "and we have the customer base that demands that we do that." He's not wrong; we wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of an army of pasty-faced teenage boys. "We have several layers of checks and balances before a game actually makes it to the market," he continues. "We have very high expectations for ourselves – attention to detail, polish, and balance – and once it makes it past that, we test the hell out of it externally as well, listen to all the feedback, and make more changes." It would seem that the obsession is not just among the players. But then, it's not surprising to see that the attention to detail and compulsion to excel that is evident in Blizzard's software has rubbed off on its consumers.

It's not just the videogame-obsessed that Blizzard is targeting though. Obviously, four and a half million subscribers aren't enough… "There are a lot of people outside the gaming circles that don't know what *World Of Warcraft* is," Chilton says. "Outside of this conference, it's very different. I'd like to bring more people into gaming, expose more people to our gaming worlds – and I think there's a lot of opportunity to do that. I think there's a lot of markets internationally that don't have the infrastructure with broadband to really be able to play online games but I think there's a lot of opportunity to bring more people into gaming." However, he keeps his feet firmly on the ground. Chilton is aware that gaming is as much about the present as it is the future. "There's a balance between when do we start something new, and when do we expand one of our existing worlds. We want to be able to do both," he says. "We're going to focus on each of our games and make them as good as we can make them, and not concentrate on the dates. People don't remember what day a game came out, they remember how good it is."

Hopefully for Chilton, though, the public will remember one date – the day they took a trip to Anaheim to pay the Blizzard boys a visit. The overall impression of the show was that of a resounding success, so surely the firm is planning another one? "We haven't made any decision about what happens after this. We'll go back home and talk about how this one went and what our plans for the future might be," he says. "I mean, there are some very specific reasons why we chose to do this here. I think being so close to our office allows us to have the entire Blizzard company attending, and I think that helps add value to the whole thing. We really wouldn't be able to do that if we had it in another location, whether it was internationally or even on the east coast of the US; it would limit how many people we would be able to send to it. The fact is, we have gamers all over the world, and it's difficult for them to come here, but we wanted to make BlizzCon as valuable as we could make it for the players." Given the reaction from the pale hordes that trudge the boards of the Anaheim Convention Centre, it would seem Blizzard has succeeded on more than one front.

Starcraft: Ghost *is out Q2 '06 on Xbox and PS2 and was previewed in issue 39.*



"WE FOCUS ON MAKING OUR GAMES AS GOOD AS THEY CAN BE. PEOPLE DON'T REMEMBER WHAT DATE A GAME CAME OUT, THEY REMEMBER HOW GOOD IT IS"

TOM CHILTON

COMMUNITY

EVERY ISSUE, games™ VISITS A DIFFERENT DEVELOPER. THIS MONTH, WE HEAD UP THE M1 TO THE HOME OF THE FULL MONTY, SHEFFIELD.

SUMO DIGITAL ROSE **FROM GREMLIN'S ASHES** TO BECOME A **LEADING UK DEVELOPMENT HOUSE.** GAMES™ TOOK A **TRIP UP NORTH** TO THE BURGEONING **CITY OF SHEFFIELD** TO PAY **SEGA'S FAVOURITE BRITS** A VISIT…

SUMO DIGITAL



01

02

1 JAMES NORTH HEARN, CEO
IN A NUTSHELL: A former employee of Gremlin Interactive and now the chief executive officer of Sheffield's finest, James is a relaxed individual who has the utmost confidence in his experienced staff and their dynamic studio.

2 SEAN MILLARD, LEAD DESIGNER
IN A NUTSHELL: Another former Gremlin and now the life and soul of the Sumo office, his enthusiasm and loquacity know no bounds and his refreshing lack of cynicism for the upcoming generation is really good news for Sumo.

The north of England has become a hotspot for videogame talent in recent years. Unlike television and film's London-centricity, the games industry is far more evenly spread across the United Kingdom, and Sumo Digital is doing its very best to put Sheffield firmly back on the development map.

James North Hearn, the CEO, is a laidback, amiable man whose demeanour and refreshing lack of bullshit are not usually associated with the head of a development studio. "For many years in Sheffield there was a big games studio called Gremlin, which goes back to the Eighties," he says, taking us through Sumo's inception. "During the latter part of the Nineties the company was bought by Infogrames, who, during a re-structure, decided to relinquish the studio. A group of the guys who worked in Sheffield got together to set up an independent studio. I was doing some work in London and they came and asked me to join them. That was in March 2003."

Sean Millard, lead designer and resident ball of energy has a concise answer when asked about Sumo's original aims: "Create stuff that we want to play,"

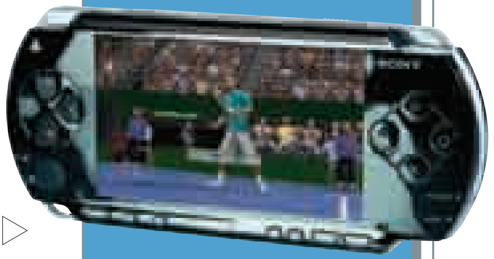
"WE WANT TO CREATE STUFF THAT WE WANT TO PLAY, AND GET BACK TO WHAT WE DO – FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT"

SEAN MILLARD, SUMO DIGITAL

he smiles. "And to get back to what we do, which is just write games and focus on pure development," North Hearn agrees, "It appeared that there wasn't a place for us anymore, so we made our own place." It sounds so simple, but the first 12 months for Sumo were anything but easy. "When we started in 2003, the industry was in a right mess," admits North Hearn. "We knew we could do good products – that wasn't an issue – we just felt the challenge was getting the work." So Sega knocking at the door must have been like mana from heaven, right? "*OutRun 2* was the first major thing," agrees Millard. "Before that, we did some bits and baps for Microsoft which got us the *International Football* with Codemasters and that was the first football game that had Xbox Live in it." This licence proved crucial for Sumo, despite never challenging the might of *Pro Evo* or *FIFA*. "Sega wanted to convert *OutRun 2* from the arcade to the Xbox and

HOLDING HANDS

Given Sumo's recent work on the PSP – *Virtua Tennis* and *Go SoDoku* – it's not surprising to hear the boys waxing lyrical about Sony's handheld gem. "I think the decision that Sony really got right with the PSP was to have that size screen. It's portable but it's big enough to deliver a real visual impact," says North Hearn. Millard is equally enthusiastic, "I didn't realise until I started playing *Everybody's Golf* again and again and again, just how much of a lazy sod I am. It boils down to the fact that I just can't be bothered to pull the consoles out from under the telly, plug them in, sort them out… With a PSP you just whip it out of your pocket, turn it on and you're there."

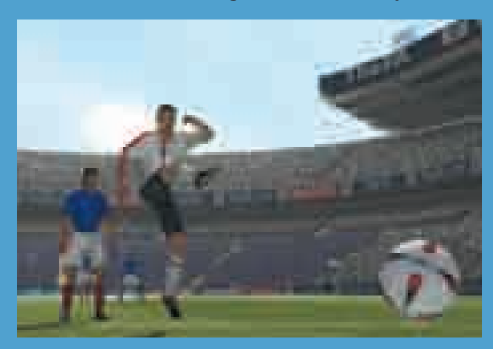


GO SUMO

It may have only been around a few years but Sumo has already made quite an impact on console gaming.

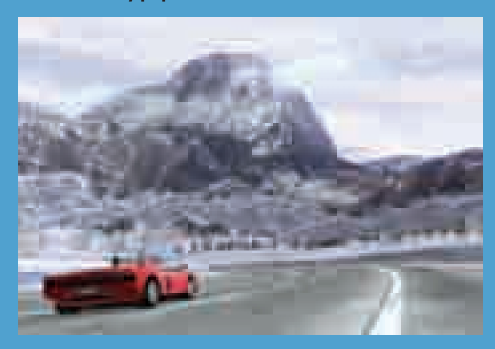
INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL [MULTI, 2003]

■ It would never be *Pro Evo*, but Sumo's first title was a solid footballing effort that crucially featured Xbox Live play for the first time in a soccer sim. The Sheffield firm was only drawn in to include the online features but it gained invaluable experience.



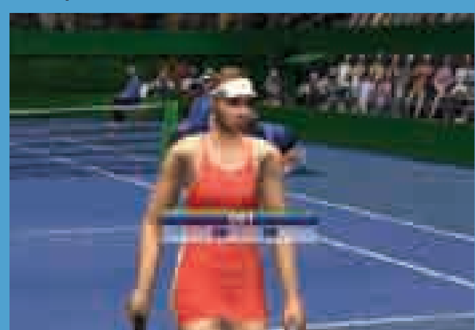
OUTRUN 2 [XBOX, 2004]

■ They said it couldn't be done, but the little-known Sumo proved everyone wrong when Sega released *OutRun 2* on the Xbox last year. Almost indistinguishable from its arcade cousin and with a solid Live mode to boot, *OutRun 2* has proven extremely popular with the hardcore crowd.



VIRTUA TENNIS [PSP, 2005]

■ Sumo had hit its stride by the time the PlayStation Portable launched in the UK, and was back in line with Sega for this handheld version of everybody's favourite tennis game. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be another stellar title and an impressive mark on Sumo's CV.



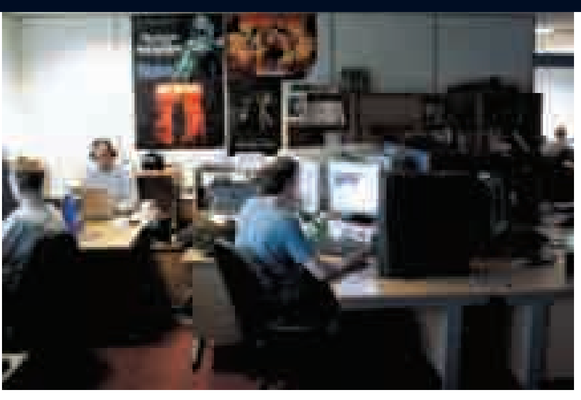
RUNNING AWAY WITH IT

Undoubtedly, Sumo's most famous project – and the game that put it on the map – is the Xbox version of *OutRun 2*. With its near-flawless graphics, arcade-perfect handling, and relaxing online races, it's a game that no Xbox owner should be without.

add a big Live element to it; we'd obviously got this experience and they came to us," Millard says.

Sumo drew a lot from working with the Japanese giant and as a designer, Millard is enamoured with Sega's style. "The good thing about Sega, from a gameplay point of view, is the straightforwardness of it," he enthuses. "A lot of its stuff you can just pick up and play. It's a long time since that's ruled the roost." It's a direction Millard's keen to see Sumo continue to move in. "One thing that's refreshing about the Sega mentality that's rubbed off on our stuff is the idea of getting back to basics. What do you want to do? You want to have fun – you don't want to learn the rule book, I certainly don't," he says. "I just want to sit down and get a blast of fun, and that's the direction we seem to be going in. It's arcadey in the broadest sense, not necessarily arcade conversions but that aesthetic – the bright colours, the instantaneous action – it appeals to us as a team."

Sega has helped Sumo Digital immeasurably, but an independent developer needs to spread its client base wider if it's to grow. "Our relationship with Sega has been extremely beneficial for us, and we've been given the chance to work on some cool products, but we also have a good relationship with others," North Hearn explains. "We're now doing a second product for Codemasters – we did *TOCA*, that was us. We are just completing *Go SuDoku* for Sony, and are well on the way to completing *Broken Sword* for THQ. So the Sega relationship is very important for what we do, but it's not the only one."







Sumo might not have the biggest team in the world, but then that just makes it easier for them to act as a cohesive unit – 'small, but perfectly formed', as some people might say.

With many projects on the horizon and the advent of the next generation, the future looks bright for Sumo. However, instead of the cynicism that so often surrounds upcoming machines, both Millard and North Hearn are upbeat. "With each generation of platform, we continue to broaden our audience and I think that's because the message is getting out to people. This generation of parents were, in fact, videogames players and what's happening is that we're turning into a population of people who've always known videogames," says North Hearn. Millard is also optimistic about the direction publishers are taking in this time of change, "One of the most exciting things that's happened is that previously a publisher would say 'Hey, we've got this great licence and we want you to build a game around it', now they'll say 'Have you got any really original exciting ideas?'." Could we be at a turning point for the industry. Could innovation really become paramount once again? "It's a bit like a renaissance," Millard answers. "Publishers are interested and they want to actually listen to you, so instead of you just doing designs and cataloguing them and stuffing them in your drawer, people are now actually reading them and showing some interest, which is really exciting."

Not as exciting as the prospect of the Revolution though. Millard can't wait to get his hands on THAT controller. "Revolution? It's going to be brilliant. That trailer, if it does really function like that… the conducting, the bloke conducting an orchestra, that's just going to be awesome." he beams. "That genuinely seems like something that's completely new, it's like, shit, it's not even a controller, it's something so out of the box that we were all gagging when we saw it, we were like 'Could you imagine what this actually means?'. There's so much scope to do something new and exciting and different with it that we were all getting really animated."

"WE'VE BEEN PART OF A MASSIVE COMPANY BEFORE. WE KNOW HOW THAT WORKS. THERE'S NO TRIBALISM HERE"
JAMES NORTH HEARN, SUMO DIGITAL

So who does Sumo see winning the console war? "Consumers," North Hearn answers concisely. "I think if it ever becomes a one-horse race – which there was a risk of – I don't think anyone would benefit. The fact that Microsoft is pushing so hard and is so focused is just going to drive Sony on, and if they're driving each other, they're driving the products and that's great for consumers."

Everything's in place for Sumo. Its 70-strong team is pulling together toward a common goal: to create consistently excellent products. But how long can the firm remain at this comparatively small size? "This last year we've had some great opportunities, we've worked on some good titles and we have to think about what to do next, whether we do get bigger or not," North Hearn says. "We've been a massive company before. We know how that works. There's no tribalism here, you're not part of one team, you're part of Sumo, that's exactly how it is."



MAKING PLANS

Sumo is already hard at work on projects for the next generation. These characters are very much a work in progress, but certainly suggest Sumo is exploring different avenues to their previous work.



"THE AIM IS NOT TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT LOOKS LIKE ART, BUT TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN FEEL AS IF IT WERE REAL"
FUMITO UEDA



The Players

FRESH AFTER THE AMERICAN RELEASE OF THEIR LATEST OPUS, SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS, ITS CREATORS TALK ABOUT ART IN GAMES, CREATIVE DESIGN AND REALLY, REALLY HUGE MONSTERS…

FUMITO UEDA AND KENJI KAIDO

SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN

Talking to Fumito Ueda and Kenji Kaido, you wonder if they are even aware of the rapturous acclaim that their games have received. Like *Ico* before it, *Shadow Of The Colossus* has already inspired a devoted contingent of fans and universal critical commendation, yet you wouldn't think it judging from their modesty. The eminently calm Kaido leaves most of the talking to Ueda, whose quiet enthusiasm illuminates the artistic influences behind one of the most striking and potentially influential games of this generation.

"There have been enormous monsters in videogames for years, but they've never been integral to game design," says Ueda. "I always thought: 'What would happen if I could climb up them and stand at the top?' That's how the game concept arrived with me." A game such as *Shadow Of The Colossus* could only have resulted from such inventive thought – its unusual structure and huge-scale fighting is without parallel. Aside from the distinctive art style, it would be difficult to tell that *Colossus* and *Ico* even came from the same studio, so different are they in terms of environment and premise.

That art style was arguably the main contributor to *Ico*'s iconic status. At the mention of 'art', Ueda shakes his head. "The aim is not to create something that looks like art," he says, commenting on the game's visual style, "but [to create] something that you can feel as if it were real. We put a lot of realistic detail into the game – it's important for players to be able to lose themselves in a detailed world." Ueda's art college and graphic design background nonetheless bring a distinctive visual style to his games, a style closer to art than most. Kaido's background, though, is strictly gaming. "I was always a huge fan of games," he explains, "so I left high school and joined Taito where I was involved in arcade games. I stayed there for ten years before I moved to Sony."

Oh, how things have changed. "Everything is different," laughs Kaido. However, developers are still not free to do whatever they want. Trying to squeeze their vision into a form that could be realised on the PS2 was a huge hurdle for Kaido and Ueda. "Of course there was a limitation in terms of hardware, but we tried to use what we had as fully as possible within its limitations," says Ueda. "If you talk about cars, you have to consider factors like max speed and acceleration," interjects Kaido. "It's the same with game consoles. [Developers] have to recognise the hardware's limitations and still be able to work within them."

It's a task to which the *Colossus* team has risen admirably – it's often hard to believe that the sweeping vistas and superb giants that fill the screen are generated by a PS2. It's trickier still to comprehend that it was born of such simple inspiration. "I started with an image of a hero on horseback in a vast field," says Ueda. "With *Ico*, it was the image of a tall girl and a smaller, horned boy. After that came the game design, and then the hardware was our next concern." Surely there were other influences? "Maybe it was a film, maybe manga, maybe something I saw or played when I was little," muses Ueda. "There was no specific inspiration."

Even without the hardware constraints, how do you follow up a game as well loved as *Ico*? "Everything about creating *Shadow Of The Colossus* was a challenge," laughs Ueda. "In the team, there weren't many people who had previously worked on an action game." The escalation in development scale since *Ico*'s 2001 release is significant – "Last time there were only 20 people working on the game," explains Kaido. "With this [latest project] there were over 30."

As the dust settles after the praise *Colossus* has received, there's but one question on our minds – what's next for the team as the next gen draws closer? Ueda thinks for a while, then speaks with simple clarity: "I'd like to make a game that I'd want to play." "At the moment there is no clear plan for the future," adds Kaido, "but we always want to keep challenging new things – that's our concept. That lets us design different sorts of games: games for the future." And if their vision is as expansive and dramatic as their latest game, we all have much to look forward to.

Shadow Of The Colossus is due out in February '06 and was reviewed in issue 39. Its predecessor, Ico is also set to be re-released in February '06.



REVIEWS

Heroes, unite – the villains are on their way to spoil the party and have their own breed of MMORPG excitement…

City Of Villains
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THE AVERAGE

Scoring's a messy business when it comes to videogames, so we keep things as simple as possible here at games™. Marking out of a possible ten, a game that is decidedly average will score five – that doesn't necessarily mean it's bad, just that it doesn't do anything particularly special against its peers. We also refuse to bow to PR pressure, meaning scores are our genuine opinion: we sing the praises of the great games and give the lesser ones the scorn they deserve. You might not always agree with us, but we're just trying to help – after all, everyone has an opinion, right?

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
$39.99

RELEASE
31 March '06
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1 (Online 2-4)

ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD

"WILD THING, I THINK I LOVE YOU"



A*nimal Crossing* is a game that proves itself to be entirely unsuited to the sort of formal evaluation that a review is expected to provide. Few games have given rise to such entirely divided opinion; for every GameCube purchaser who sings this game's praises, there is one who failed entirely to see the point. Some saw nothing more than an exercise in repetitiveness and tedium, as opposed to the simple yet captivating and inventive little game that had thousands of gamers inexplicably enthralled. With that in mind, it's safe to say that those who fell into the former group aren't going to find much to like here, because this is not a new *Animal Crossing*. It's more what *Animal Crossing* should have been in the first place.

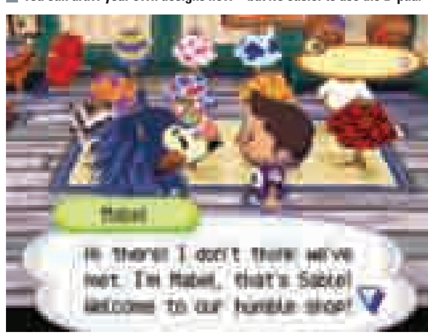
Its first advantage is that it's tighter in terms of design and control. Sending post, typing letters, selling items and other such everyday functions are less cumbersome than they were on the N64 and GameCube, largely due to the convenience of the DS's touch screen. Control is better too, being both touch screen friendly and well suited to the DS's D-pad and button layout. *Animal Crossing* is a very leisurely game and being able to control it with just a stylus is very appropriate to the laid-back style of play.

In fact, *Animal Crossing* on the DS is even more laid back than it was on the GameCube, if that's even possible. Rather oddly, you can't ask animals for errands any more, only talk to them – they will occasionally approach you with tasks but you can no longer spend a day running after them doing chores like you could before. Consequently there's even less to actually do in order to earn money; you're essentially limited to fishing or bug hunting. The pace is consequently slower on the DS, despite the refinements that the game has undergone.

Its second advantage is that it's portable. Being a game that needs regular, daily investment over a period of months in order to get the most out of it, it's immeasurably more convenient to be able to keep it in a pocket and bring it out whenever you have a spare five



You can draw your own designs now – but it's easier to use the D-pad.



Sure, let other people visit… but don't go letting them steal your treasure.



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

REFINEMENT: The post system's been revamped and various other aspects have been tweaked.

REVOLUTION: Your town set-up is almost entirely new, with a few fresh locations – but no new items.

SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE TOOLS

No *Animal Crossing* player should be without their tools, and the trusty shovel, bug net and fishing rod return for this DS incarnation, accompanied by the new timer, slingshot and watering can. Although the latter's function is fairly self-explanatory, the timer is more geared to online play – it measures how many fish and bugs are caught in a certain period of time, making it perfect for impromptu contests with visitors to the town. The slingshot is used to shoot floating presents out of the sky above, should you ever see them. Buried treasures are significantly scarcer in this version of the game too, so in order to acquire a complete fossil collection you will have to keep an especially vigilant lookout for irregularities in the ground.





minutes. After a couple of days in the company of *Wild World*, being tied to a television with a controller for an hour or so every day seems inconceivable. Carrying your town around with you feels entirely natural and greatly facilitates the gameplay – tending to your little world doesn't seem like half as much of a commitment when you can do it on the bus.

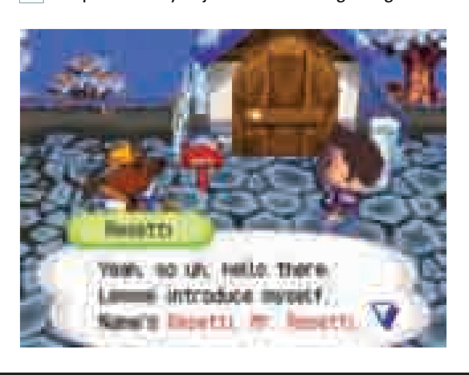
"AFTER A FEW DAYS IN THE COMPANY OF WILD WORLD, BEING TIED TO A TELEVISION WITH A CONTROLLER FOR AN HOUR OR SO EVERY DAY SEEMS INCONCEIVABLE"

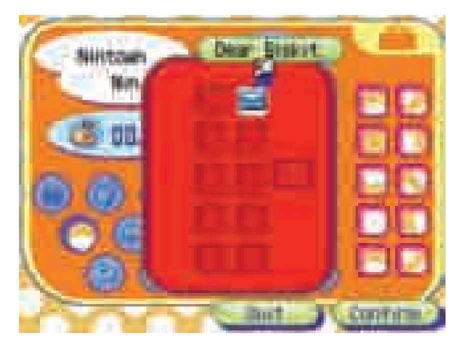
The third and most revolutionary advantage that *Animal Crossing: Wild World* has over its home console iteration, of course, is that it's online. For a game so firmly community-centred as *Animal Crossing* to be entirely offline felt slightly unnatural and the cumbersome business of exchanging memory cards and item codes in order to involve like-minded friends in the experience was, to be frank, slightly ridiculous. Now, via the DS's wireless functions, friends in the same room can visit your town without a hitch, items can be bought and traded without any hassle and, most importantly, anyone from anywhere in the world can come to visit via the internet if you register them as a friend.

The game's online functions are surprisingly simple. It really is just a matter of getting within a compatible wireless zone, obtaining a registration code and swapping it with your friends' in order to visit each other's towns. The town gate, now guarded by familiar police dogs Copper and Booker, acts as a portal allowing you to invite your friends out or go out adventuring yourself. Up to four people can visit your town at any one time and communicate via on-screen text input and basic character emoticons ('shy', 'angry', 'pleased' and a variety of other emotions can be learned from your town's wacky psychiatrist whenever he pays a visit). It's up to the host to entertain the visitors, whether by instigating impromptu fishing or bug-catching competitions or by letting them loose on the insane locals. *Animal Crossing* online feels entirely instinctive and really is a great way to break in the DS's online functionality.



Finally, writing letters and other input-heavy things don't take 20 minutes to do. Praise be to the Nintendo touch screen indeed…









You'll see plenty of familiar faces, as many of the town characters are from the GameCube version.

"SUCH ADAMANT FIDELITY TO THE HOME CONSOLE VERSION GOES BEYOND PROVOKING THAT FOND NOSTALGIA ON WHICH NINTENDO BASES ITS GAMES"

The DS also brings a revamp in presentation – the top screen displays the sky, which at night is punctuated by stars and constellations that you can draw on yourself in the observatory. The graphical style is exactly the same but the world is presented as a rotating globe rather than the almost top-down perspective we saw before – as your character runs upwards, things appear on the horizon and then pass by. Designing clothing and swapping favourite drawings with friends is also now touch screen friendly, although this is less advantageous than you might think due to the pixel-based design template. It's extremely difficult to draw precise and straight lines with a DS stylus, however steady-handed you might be, although employing the D-pad instead (just this once) fixes this. There's also heightened customisation in the form of hairstyles, hats, sunglasses and other accessories that never appeared in the GameCube version, allowing players to distinguish effectively between each other when online.



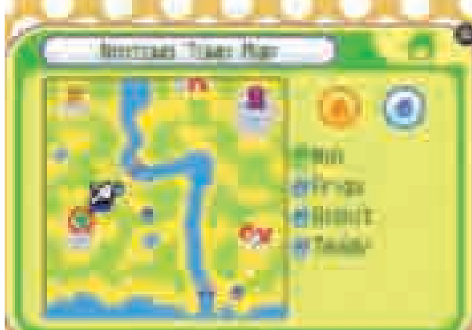
games™ GLOBAL

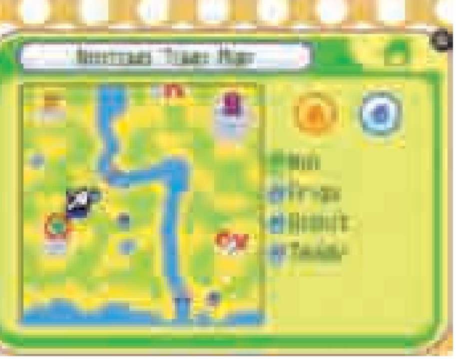
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

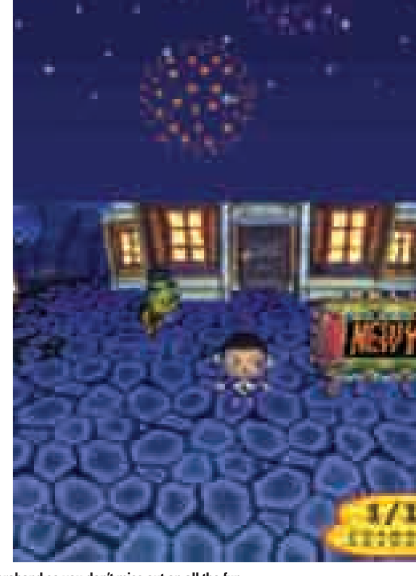
COME ON OVER: Up to four people at a time can visit your town over the internet.

GERROF MOI LAAAND!: Watch who you invite, as you don't want hoodlums running amok with axes.









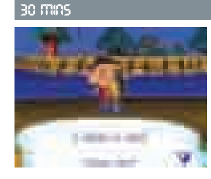
Festival days are as great as ever, and the animals will be sure to remind you beforehand so you don't miss out on all the fun.



24:00 TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

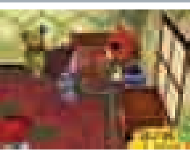
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



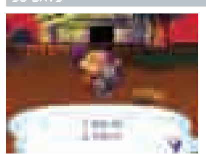
Running chores for Tom Nook will neatly introduce you to the way *Wild World* works, just as it did before. You can't ask animals for errands this time around, though…

30 HOURS



You'll likely have a slightly bigger house by now and will be busy populating it with pretty things. And there are lots of said pretty things to be pilfered from the lost and found.

30 DAYS



As your first month draws to a close, you willl notice that the trees and weather will change accordingly… and you'll do everything all over again.

I'M DIGGING IT

K.K. Slider, the well-loved guitar-playing dog who used to play outside the station on Saturday nights, has been moving up in the world since the first *Animal Crossing*. These days he plays at The Roost Café, a quiet but fashionable establishment located within the museum. K.K. plays all the old favourites, although like much of the game, his roster remains largely unchanged, despite his step up to stage performance. As before, tinny-sounding versions of his acoustic 'live' performance are available on tape, although as you generally spend very little time in your house, it doesn't really matter. The Roost also offers over-priced but apparently delicious cups of coffee, poured by a reticent yet vaguely eccentric bartender called Brewster.



Co-ordinating friend visits and making your own fun is all part of the experience.



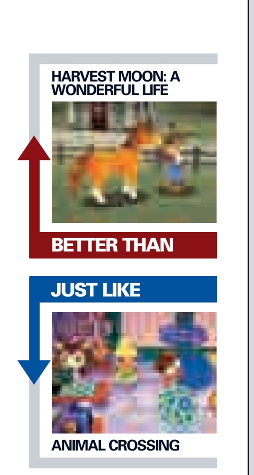
Constellations you create actually appear in the sky at certain points, so don't draw anything rude…

Back in the main single-player game, though, the experienced player may feel slightly put out. Aside from those three admittedly significant advantages, *Animal Crossing: Wild World* is exactly the same as the home-console versions. The items are the same, the item descriptions are the same, the fish and bugs are the same and the town inhabitants are the same – even the hilariously bad puns are almost identical. You'll find the same fruits on the trees and the same shells on the shore as you did three years ago on the GameCube. Such adamant fidelity to the home console version of the game goes beyond provoking that fond nostalgia on which Nintendo games often base their appeal. Instead, it's downright disappointing for experienced players hoping to find a new version of the game rather than just an update.

Consequently, *Animal Crossing: Wild World* might face problems. Players who never enjoyed it on the GameCube won't suddenly start to enjoy it now, and players who loved the previous version might find themselves indisposed to doing it all over again on a different format; *Animal Crossing* has always required a formidable degree of temporal investment. Playing it again makes you really realise how very, very simple the first game was as you spend three hours fishing in order to pay off your first mortgage; *Animal Crossing* always relied almost entirely on its completely inexplicable charm as opposed to its actual gameplay, and it's entirely possible that players will return to the game only to find that that charm is no longer there for them.

With continuous play however, it's almost impossible not to be drawn back into the game. Although the thrill of finding a new item or fish will no longer be there for those who played the first game to death, the compulsion to collect and the consistent entertainment provided by your gently insane neighbours still work their magic and forge the same unfathomable addiction as they did before. *Animal Crossing: Wild World* may not be the revamped game with hundreds of new items, characters and collectables that we would have so dearly loved to see, but it is as oddly addictive and entirely charming as it was before. With the addition of the online features, it's unlikely that any *Animal Crossing* fan will be able to hold themselves back from purchasing this game. Hopefully, its format will introduce it to hundreds of new players too.





FAQs

Q. HOW MANY ITEMS?
Over a thousand. About 1,250, in fact.

Q. SO WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY DO?
Fish, catch bugs and collect things. That's about it, honestly.

Q. WHAT'S THE POINT?
If you have to ask that question, then there is no point in you buying this game.

Q. WHY NOT?
Because you'll probably hate it. *Animal Crossing* is an acquired taste.

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Red Octane

DEVELOPER
Harmonix

PRICE
$69.99

RELEASE
TBA (US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-2

"THAT'S RIGHT – MY GUITAR IS IN MY MIND!"

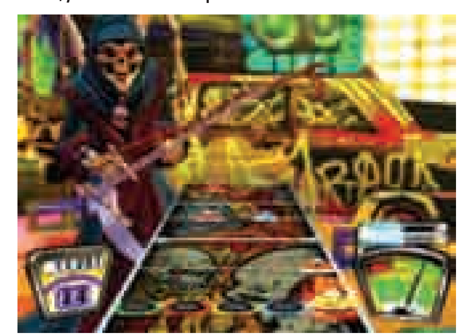
GUITAR HERO

Curse you, Harmonix. In a good way, of course. Over the last few days, we've discovered that it's genuinely impossible to walk past someone playing *Guitar Hero* without playing it yourself. It's more universally loved than puppies. Just minutes after the chunky box was cracked open, the office grinded to a halt as a crowd gathered round a grown man with a plastic toy guitar; and whether they admitted it or not, it was clear that every single one of them was gagging to get their hands on this ridiculous peripheral. And going by the insane amount of fun that was being had, who can blame them? Still, it'd take more than an angry mob to tear us away from what is easily a contender for game of the year.

The basics are simple enough in theory – hold down one or two of the five coloured 'fret' buttons and hit the strum bar in time with the music. It even looks deceptively simple while you watch someone else rock out, lulling you into writing cheques with your mouth that your ass isn't able to cash once guitar and hands join forces. But it's with the extras that the controller really turns frowns upside down. Elongated notes can be bent with the working whammy bar for bonus points and a tilt sensor in the guitar itself detects when it is held upright to activate Star Power, a score multiplier that adds effects to your sound and sends your on-screen avatar into something of a frenzy.

Unlike Harmonix's double whammy of *Amplitude* and *FreQuency*, the tunes of *Guitar Hero* aren't licensed tracks but amazingly authentic covers. If it weren't for the fact that the songs are introduced with 'As made famous by' in true karaoke fashion, you'd be hard pressed to tell whether you're actually playing along with Queen or not. Track selection is also typically superb – Harmonix knows what works in a rhythm action game and whether or not you like the songs, you'll love playing them. Ozzy, Bowie and Judas Priest represent the old-school while new kids on the block like Sum 41 and Franz Ferdinand keep the game appealing to those under-educated in the ways of classic rock. And on top of the 30 tunes that comprise the game's main mode are some 17 bonus songs from lesser-known artists and, of course, Freezepop.

Presentation-wise, Harmonix is no slouch either. *Guitar Hero* is a beautiful game and everything from the themed menu and loading screens to the crowded arenas (that you never get to see unless watching someone else play) is well styled and suits the feel of the game perfectly. But if you think the game is going to go easy on you, you've got another thing coming… or rather,



You might be a king or a little street sweeper but sooner or later, you'll dance with the reaper.



It looks good on screen but the real action in multiplayer mode happens in front of the TV – rock poses and showmanship win the day.



Pretend you're in Oasis by setting the game to Easy and picking this shoe-gazing fool.

'HARMONIX HANDS'

No, it's not some kind of charity that you don't want to give money to. We're referring to the condition brought on by extensive play of not only *Guitar Hero* but any Harmonix game. After extensive play on the little guitar (particularly on more taxing tunes), your left hand starts to go numb and when you come away, picking things up or even moving your fingers becomes a real chore. But even a crippled hand won't stop you playing more and more *Guitar Hero*, fighting through the pain with the sheer glory of Harmonix's sublime rock-'em-up. And the more you play, the worse it gets until a trip to hospital for some bone straightening looks to be on the cards. Very few things are worth this kind of pain but luckily, *Guitar Hero* is one of them.



games™

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GIBSON JR: Bust out your mini SG replica and jam along with nearly 50 tunes.

FIVE AND UNDER: Easy and Normal modes don't use all five buttons – they're a good place to start.

you've got lots more coloured dots coming at a terrifying pace. At first, complex arrangements look impossible but as with *Amplitude* or *DDR*, you'll soon come to recognise stock patterns and once you start 'seeing in code', matters get a lot easier. Working on those simpler songs first is a sure-fire way to learn what the game will be throwing your way when you jump in at the deep end.

Indeed, the real beauty of the game shines through when you start to crank up the difficulty. Anybody with any degree of rhythm action experience should be able to blitz through Easy and Normal modes with minimal fuss but from Hard up, advanced techniques come into play and the game gets ever closer to playing a real guitar. Later tracks invite you to use simulated power chords, hammer-ons and pull-offs to successfully shred your way through each song – you'll dread those solos that were tricky enough on Normal mode as hundreds more notes get thrown in with each difficulty upgrade. A word of warning to actual guitarists: lower difficulties remove some notes that you may feel should naturally be there, especially if it's a track you know particularly well, so you'll need to pay attention to which you're being asked to play. That's why the game is better as it gets tougher – there can be no confusion when playing more or less everything you hear.

There was never any doubt in our mind that *Guitar Hero* would be incredible, but it's still managed to exceed our expectations and the disc hasn't been back in the case since it arrived. Kicking in Star Power just as you're about to kick out the main lick from *More Than A Feeling* makes us happier than we've ever been and nailing a tough solo is easily as satisfying as anything that's ever happened in a videogame. Few titles are worth shelling out for an NTSC PlayStation2 and a game that will cost just short of £100 to import. But when you're beaming from ear to ear after blitzing that *Bark At The Moon* solo on Expert, money won't be an issue. You need this game in your life like you can't imagine.



VERDICT 9/10

THE FINEST PERIPHERAL-BASED GAME EVER

GUITAR FREAKS



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

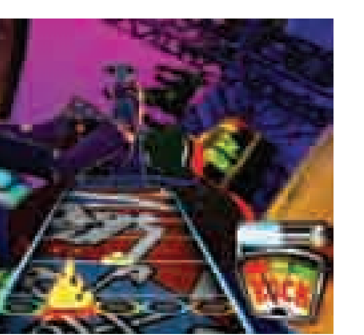
BEING SLASH

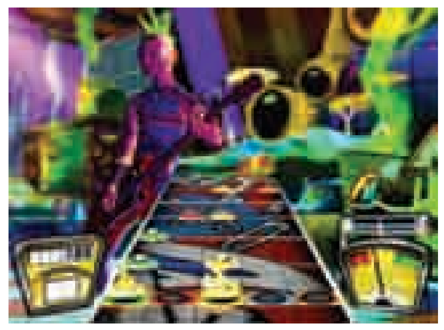
FAQs

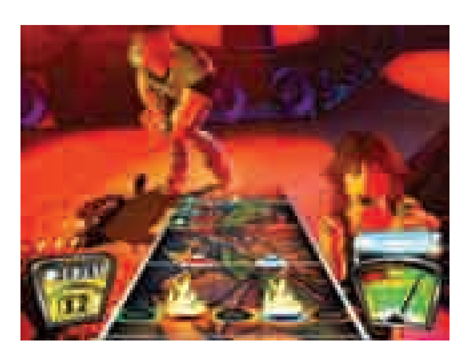
Q. HOW MANY SONGS?
Just shy of 50 tracks, most of which are covers of recognised guitar classics.

Q. NOT ORIGINAL ARTISTS THEN?
A few, yeah, but believe us when we say that the covers are so good that you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference.

Q. GOOD MULTIPLAYER?
Believe it. It's *Duelling Banjos* with rock guitars – what more could you ask for?





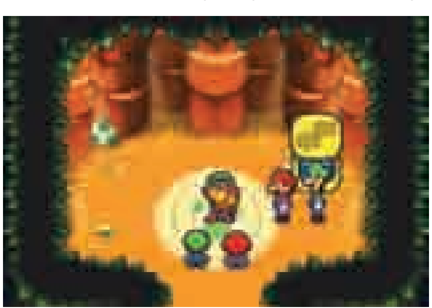




Double-team attacks – known as Bros Moves – are still present, though they just as much careful timing and practice as before, if not more so.

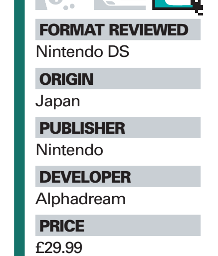


Babies. Yoshis. Err… more things ending in 'ees'. That's *Mario & Luigi 2* for you.



The game's humour is spot on, if a little guffaw inducing…

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Alphadream

PRICE
£29.99

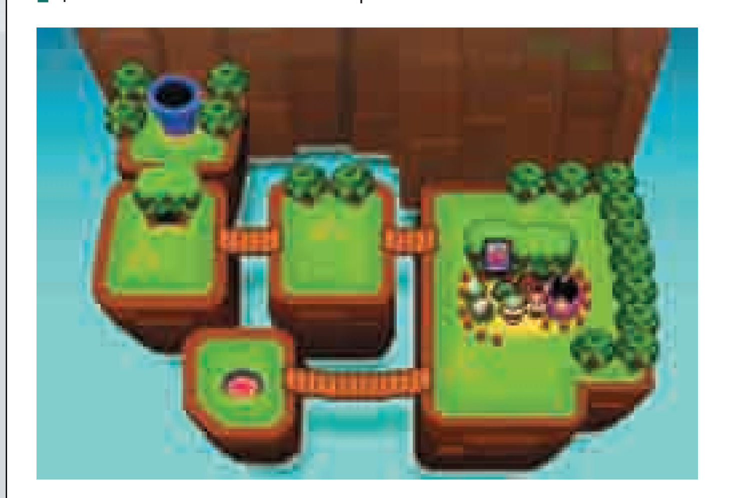
RELEASE
27 January '06

PLAYERS
1

DOUBLE THE PLEASURE, TRIPLE THE FUN?

MARIO & LUIGI 2: PARTNERS IN TIME

We've seen some grimace-inducing subtitles in our time. For every sequel that comes with an unimaginative yet inoffensive digit after it's name, there's another where somebody decided to beat the English language with a heavy bat and provide a title that prefers to stick in the throat rather than roll off the tongue. In a way, we've managed to get used to this, but replacing the word 'crime' with 'time', as has happened in this sequel to *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga*, is an act of sheer evil and could possibly put all but the most soft-hearted Nintendo fan off, as it reeks of the 'kiddy image' that Nintendo has rightfully earned itself.



However, rather than paying any particular attention to this, you would be better off looking past any negativity that titles such as *Mario Sunshine, Baseball* and *Smash Football* may have instilled and concentrating on the first title in the series. *Superstar Saga* was a quality game – taking the well-known *Mario* cast and forming an RPG could have turned into a disaster, but the inclusion of an innovative fast-action battle system that made even the great *Paper Mario* seem sub-par, and a good 15 hours of solid gameplay made it a game that was far from infantile and, as a result, still manages to find itself nestled inside our GBA every now and then.

Nintendo would be foolish to mess with that winning formula, and we're more than pleased

■ "And where do you think you're going, little buddy?" This rather Shroobish Yoshi puts his ridiculously long, sticky tongue to good use.

that *Partners In Time* – title aside – not only displays the quality that the original possessed, but also uses the DS's abilities to enhance rather than destroy. Fancy that.

You'll neither have to spend your time prodding Goombas, nor will you have to feel foolish on the train as you urge your virtual pug to respond to you, all the while cursing your decision to name him whatever it was you obviously found so amusing at the time. No, the DS has been used well and this innovation feels unforced as the top screen treats you to either a map screen (actually useful), an extended battle arena (actually used) or a means of controlling both parties when a puzzle requires you to separate (actually essential).

That's right, we said both parties. This time, as the name suggests, you'll be able to travel through time and meet up with the now seemingly standard characters Baby Mario and Baby Luigi. This is where the game differs most from its forerunner. Although there are four characters, you can only control them two at a time, meaning that there's much switching to be done. Amazingly, this doesn't get tedious. Thanks to the adult characters being able to carry their younger selves around, movement is simple and the dual screen aids you when they're forced to work separately. In battle, the fact that you have four characters doesn't really make things easier. You only receive two attack turns no matter how many characters you have, but you'll have more options open to you, and the most damaging require not only a full cast but expert timing and reflexes too.

Unfortunately, no matter how blessed with skill you are, there's no real way to make the gruelling boss fights any more fun. Thankfully there aren't too many of them, but having an apparently limitless life bar and many drawn out attack animations, they are far too slow to be enjoyable and serve more as an annoying milestone to be conquered rather than a suitable boss character.

Also slightly annoying is how linear the game is. Okay, this is *Mario*, we weren't expecting anything too sprawling, but with two different time zones on offer, you kind of feel that there should be a little more freedom. What actually happens is that the 'present day' area serves as nothing more than a hub and even though other areas are visible on the map, you only really get to see them when you head back in time.

That said, there's very little else to complain about and once again there's more than enough game here to keep you busy for 15 or so hours, so perhaps the fact that it's reasonably linear is a good thing. Although arguably a little similar to the original, *Partners In Time* provides a refreshing change from most of the DS's existing line-up and is definitely worth a look if you're after a way to kill a fair few hours.



VERDICT 8/10

STUPID TITLE, BUT A GAME WELL WORTH YOUR TIME

A CAST OF THOUSANDS

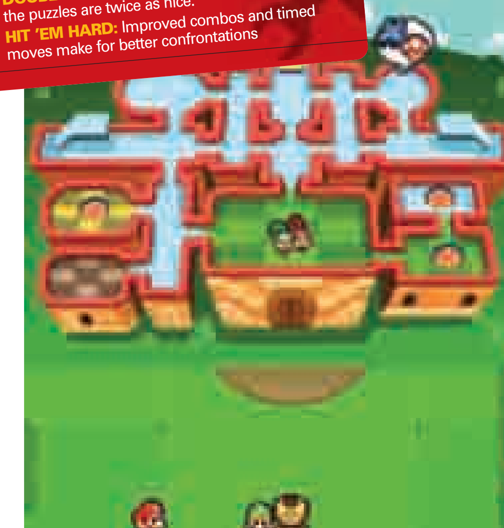
How can you have a *Mario* game without all your favourites turning up for the party? The whole crew has been crammed in here somewhere from *Sunshine* boss and *Double Dash!!* secret character Petey Piranha right the way through to classics like Yoshi, Wiggler and Kamek. Also, when it comes to combat, they will all have recognisable moves as well as weak spots – Yoshi's Cookies even make a brief appearance. Of course, there's also a host of new characters out to thwart you, including an evil alien race called the Shroobs and a collection of all-new Shy Guys – the family just keeps on growing.

games™ ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

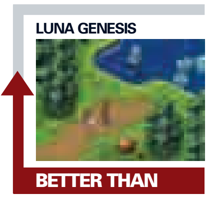
DOUBLE TROUBLE: With both babies and adults the puzzles are twice as nice.

HIT 'EM HARD: Improved combos and timed moves make for better confrontations



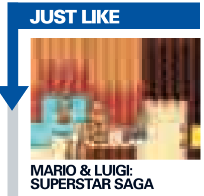
■ The top screen does actually come in useful, despite how it looks.

LUNA GENESIS



BETTER THAN

JUST LIKE



MARIO & LUIGI: SUPERSTAR SAGA

FAQs

Q. WHO ARE BETTER, BABIES OR ADULTS?
Well, neither are without their charms.

Q. SHROOBS? WHAT ABOUT BOWSER?
Don't worry. As usual, he's around causing problems too.

Q. NO STYLUS THEN?
Nope, and a good thing that is too.

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Take 2 Interactive

DEVELOPER
2K Sports

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-2

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON?

AMPED 3

We've played some pretty weird games in our time. Uncles have been chucked around in *Bishi Bashi*, the wireframe evolution of man has been witnessed while lost deep in *Rez*, and we've even played golf with frogs (thanks, *Ribbit King*). It might come as quite a surprise, then, when we suggest that *Amped 3* could be the most bizarre game that we've ever come across. Not exactly what was expected from extreme sports' most straight-laced franchise…

There's obviously a trend in snowboarding that we've missed out on. *SSX On Tour* had a superb art style that managed to be both humorous and attractive, and suited the game's 'extreme' ethos to a tee; *Amped 3* takes this formula and multiplies it by a hundred. The Story mode – the main bulk of the game – has seemingly been constructed by a madman who has spent the last five years of his life with a bong sellotaped to his mouth. Within five minutes, a small and uncomplicated snowboarding challenge has been sandwiched in between video clips of toys fighting. As the story progresses, the cut-scenes delve further into the realms of the surreal. A quiz show populated solely by heads made out of people's hands, a sock puppet show and a high-action anime are all waiting in a skunk-fuelled haze for anyone not too freaked out to continue playing.

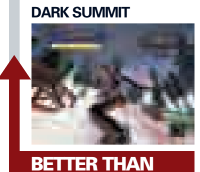
Obviously, such a bold design choice is going to split opinion. There's a fine line between amusement and irritation and *Amped 3* treads that line constantly and without fear. Thankfully, the actual piste action is a little more sedate. Playing very much like its predecessors, the game sits closer to simulation than *SSX* and allows for a pleasant and smooth ride down the slopes. The trick system is still a little loose and as a result never matches the explosive adrenaline rush of Electronic Arts' game or the precision of Nintendo's *1080˚ Snowboarding.* However, after a few runs it starts to click and it's possible to pull off *Tony Hawk's*-style combos, mixing aerial tricks, grinds and manuals (or 'butters', as they're known here) to devastating effect. Hit enough tricks and your boarder will enter Awesome mode, surrounding them in a crazy graphic that shoots light off in all directions. It's a nice system that rewards skilful play, and it looks rather lovely too. As does the rest of the game.

Although initially, the pristine white slopes of the first mountain come off as rather sterile, by the time you travel to Salt Lake City – and the second piste – the graphics really hit their stride. The draw distance, for instance, is phenomenal. Leaping from one of the many natural ramps when up at the summit allows the engine to really show off as the entire mountain pours into view and each little tree and structure can be seen from miles away. This is what we should be expecting from the next generation of gaming: to stare, jaw agape as the machine starts to throw polygons around like pogs.



games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
CRACK PIPE: No one could have expected *Amped 3* to be quite as bizarre as it is.
SEVEN UP: There are seven enormous mountains on which to ply your trade. Well done, 2K Sports.

DARK SUMMIT





BETTER THAN

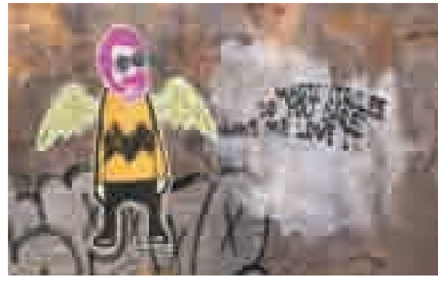
WORSE THAN



SSX ON TOUR

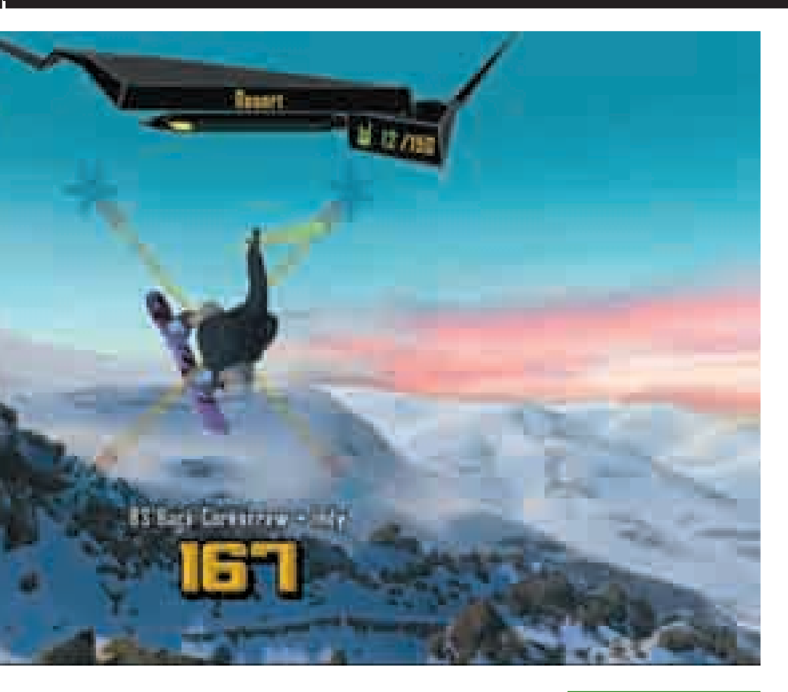
■ To be fair, the visuals really are rather lovely. Shame the gameplay isn't quite there.

■ While *Amped 3* may be as mad as a box of frogs, it simply doesn't thrill like *SSX On Tour.*









PAIN IN THE EVERYTHING

Amped 3 has challenges and modes pouring from every orifice, but our favourite involved chucking our little man off a cliff and seeing how much pain we could cause him. With copious use of lovely next-gen ragdoll physics and a damage engine that understands that flying headfirst into a tree hurts more than rolling down some snow, hours can be frittered away just listening to the poor chap scream as you try to break every bone in his body. The naive way he excitedly holds onto his sled before flying to his death never fails to tickle us. Poor bastard.



Watch your boarder tumble downhill like a rag doll and when you think he can't take it no more… do it again.

It's not just the pretty graphics that 2K Sports has been busy working on. There's a tremendous amount of variety to *Amped 3* – it offers snowmobiles, sleds, toboggans and even a hang-glider as an accompaniment to the snowboarding. Unfortunately, none of these modes of transport provide the subtlety and skill of the boarding, and aside from chucking your rider off massive cliffs on a tiny sled, they only act as a brief distraction from the real matter at hand. The game's expansive seven mountains, however, do feel like a very worthwhile addition. Each one is close to the size of *SSX On Tour*'s singular peak, and each feels significantly different enough to warrant its inclusion.

Unfortunately, despite the positively monstrous amount of activities and square miles of virgin snow, *Amped 3* doesn't quite match up to its peers when it comes to thrill seeking. Regardless of the obvious technical improvements over *SSX*, at no time does this capture that game's sheer excitement. The boarding is slower, looser and floatier than, perhaps, it should be and it just doesn't match the insane design ethos of *On Tour*.

And yet *Amped 3* is still strangely compelling. The drug-crazed cut-scenes and the characters and settings have had so much care and attention lavished upon them that it makes the game feel complete and consistent, even though it's as mental as Richard O'Brien on crystal meths. A lack of Live play is a damned shame, but the amount of choice and challenges are astounding – as long as you can cope with the insanity. And the toys. The fighting toys.

VERDICT 7/10
GRAPHICALLY SUPERB, BUT LACKS THRILLS

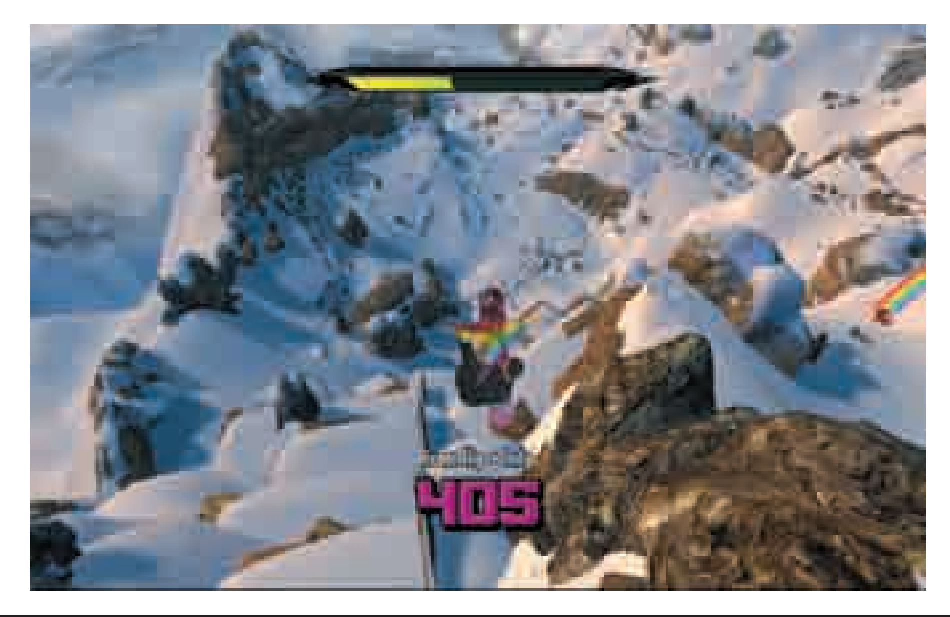
FAQs

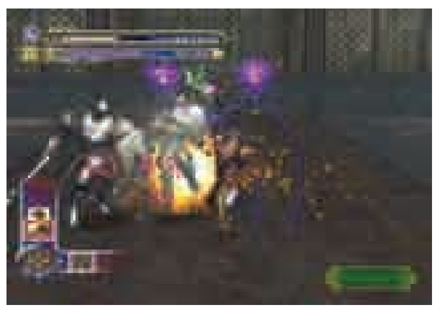
Q. I ONLY LIKE GAMES WHERE TOYS FIGHT.
Well, you're in luck – *Amped 3* features more toy tussles per square inch than anything else on the market.

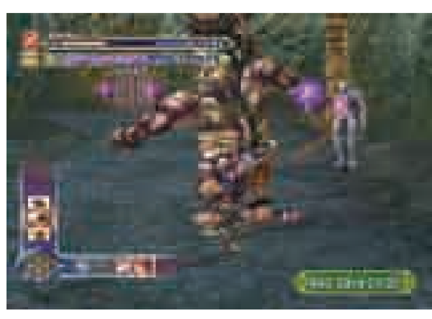
Q. BETTER THAN SSX…?
No, but it's different enough to still warrant a play through.

Q. CAN I PLAY ONLINE?
Tragically no, but nevertheless there's a hell of a lot to do offline.






Visually, there's little difference to the original *Castlevania* on PS2.


Using the targetting lock-on often sends the camera spinning like mad.


Three skeletons, one Hector… but then, he's got a fairy for company.

CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS

TOO MUCH SUCKING, NOT ENOUGH BITE

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Konami

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
$49.99

RELEASE
February '06
(US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1

Devil Forgemaster, getting on in years, seeks Innocent Devils for shared experience and sword swinging. Enjoys killing demons, long walks down repetitive corridors, collecting gems and killing more demons. Looking for long-term commitment – must be willing to perform on command." It's a personal ad we might consider responding to ourselves, had we not already experienced *Curse Of Darkness*, Konami's continuation of the *Castlevania* series; because of that, we've just about had our fill, thanks. It's not that we regret the experience completely – the game does have charm, albeit limited. Even so, we didn't expect the continuation of such a prestigious franchise to feel so… well, not *Castlevania*.

Run down the checklist of *Castlevania* expectations and you'll find ticks in short supply. Dracula? No (for 99.9 per cent of the game, anyway). Heroic vampire hunter? One, relegated to the role of a measly boss character. Whip? Hell, no. Instead, *Curse Of Darkness* places you as a generic bad guy re-entering the ruins of Dracula's castle to exact revenge on someone instantly forgettable for reasons that are, again, hardly memorable. It's all so generic that we had to do a double take. Since when did the *Castlevania* series start dealing in stories and characters that were non-empathetic and bland by design? Not as long as we can recall.



It would probably help if our 'hero' Hector was an interesting and charismatic protagonist… but he's not. Maybe it's the fact that he looks like the third runner-up in an Alucard look-alike contest, or that he speaks like something out of a bad American soap opera (though the cardboard voice acting is, strangely, one of the game's more charming elements) but he's a completely insipid character against the likes of Soma Cruz or any of the Belmont clan. And the rest of the cast isn't much better, with ridiculous uber-baddie Isaac.

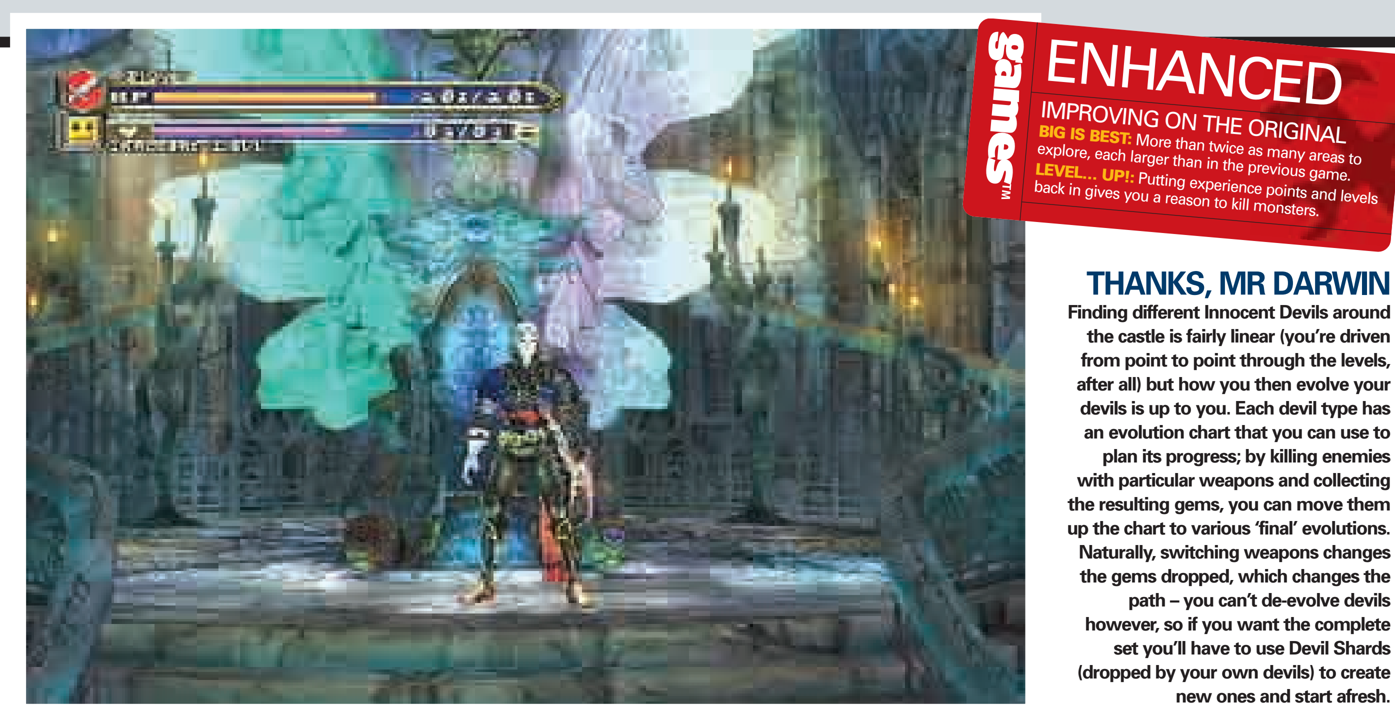
Still, we can't say that *Curse Of Darkness* doesn't get a few things right, specifically over the last PS2 instalment that fell down on almost everything. The most noticeable enhancement is scope; *Curse Of Darkness*'s range of 11 stages (plus two secret ones) dwarf *Castlevania*'s six relatively small levels in both number and size. There may be twice as many identical-looking tunnels for you to explore, but strangely, the increase in size hasn't lead to an increase in visual variety. Konami has also seen sense and re-introduced experience points and levelling up, finally giving you a reason to bother killing anything (something that the original sorely lacked). Even acquiring better weapons is tied to killing enemies, with the combinable materials they

FAQs

Q. WHERE ARE THE VAMPIRES?
We're not sure. It's not terrible that Konami has tried to do something different, but… well, it feels too generic to be *Castlevania*.

Q. HOW MANY DEVILS?
Around 30, although that includes every evolution; if you want to see them all, you'll have to play the game for an awfully long time.

Q. BEST BIT?
Not surprisingly for a *Castlevania* game, it's the music – it's a little more generic than past games, but still worthy of the franchise.



■ As before, save rooms are the only place where you'll find respite.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BIG IS BEST: More than twice as many areas to explore, each larger than in the previous game.
LEVEL… UP!: Putting experience points and levels back in gives you a reason to kill monsters.

THANKS, MR DARWIN

Finding different Innocent Devils around the castle is fairly linear (you're driven from point to point through the levels, after all) but how you then evolve your devils is up to you. Each devil type has an evolution chart that you can use to plan its progress; by killing enemies with particular weapons and collecting the resulting gems, you can move them up the chart to various 'final' evolutions. Naturally, switching weapons changes the gems dropped, which changes the path – you can't de-evolve devils however, so if you want the complete set you'll have to use Devil Shards (dropped by your own devils) to create new ones and start afresh.

drop working in conjunction with 'recipes' earned by levelling up to create new tools of destruction.

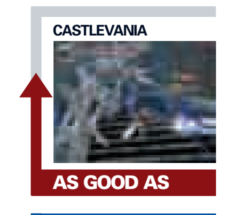
The big change comes with the Devil Forging – a concept that removes the use of side-weapons, but replaces them with something more pro-active. Coming in a variety of forms – Fairy, Battle, Mage and Bird to name but a few – each Innocent Devil proffers Hector different abilities such as healing, attacks or flight that use up his Heart supply. So it's nothing more than a simple combination of the Familiar and Sub-Weapon concepts – at least having to swap out devils depending on the situation is relatively involving.

Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the game wrapped around these changes. Yes, it's bigger; yes, there's slightly more to it; and yes, it's a new take on a familiar template – but it's just so bland that this proves more a distraction than an improvement. Running down yet another faceless corridor, hacking down anything in front of you with ease gets tiring and when added to the newly movable camera – which is fiddly at best, annoyingly broken at worst and combines with the lock-on ability to create a giddy mess of movement – you'll be wishing it was all over. But it won't be, because the game's been made twice as long.

Maybe it's a curse that the series is born to bear, but *Curse Of Darkness* fails to change the fact that there still hasn't been a truly decent 3D version of *Castlevania* yet. It's not to say that this latest effort is bad… it's just not great. And it should be – it's *Castlevania*, after all.

VERDICT 5/10
THE LITTLE CASTLEVANIA GAME THAT COULDN'T

CASTLEVANIA

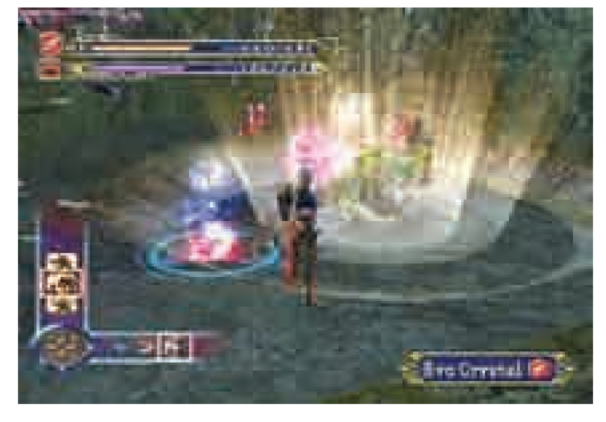


AS GOOD AS

WORSE THAN



DEVIL MAY CRY 3

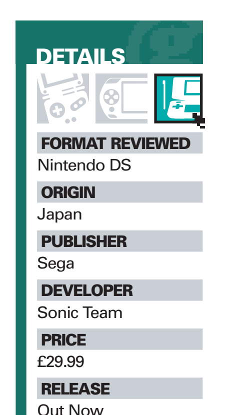




■ At least the need for experience points give your killing spree a purpose…

SONIC RUSH

OH, HE'S IN A HURRY ALL RIGHT…



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

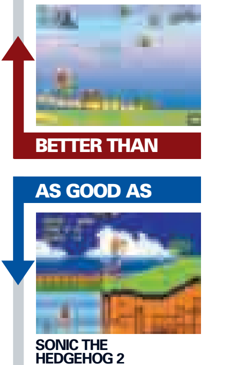
PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
Sonic Team

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-2



Sonic has been due a return to form for quite some time. Not since his heyday on the Mega Drive has the iconic star featured in a truly memorable game. *Sonic Heroes* and the debacle that is *Shadow* tarnished the blue one's name and we were worried that he was fading into insignificance… Five minutes with *Sonic Rush* is all it takes to eradicate that concern. As soon as your eyes adjust to the concept of simultaneously concentrating on two screens, the game's strengths become immediately apparent. It's all about speed. More so than any other *Sonic* game. More so than any other platform game, in fact.

The crux of *Rush's* gameplay is the quest for the fastest line through each stunning level. When approaching a stage for the first time, it's worth proceeding with caution, to avoid pitfalls and enemies. However, after repeated play, it's entirely possible to sprint through an 'act' without stopping. This sensation of speed, mixed with the superb score from Hideki Naganuma (of *Jet Set Radio* fame), makes for a thrilling, highly skilful videogame experience.

The only downside to this constant speed is the game's difficulty. *Sonic Rush* is an incredibly tricky game, and although rarely unfair, some may find fault with the overuse of bottomless pits. Falling from one screen to the other is encouraged, although you'll sometimes simply drop into oblivion. However, the majority of 'safe' drops are signposted with rings so extended play removes this issue almost entirely. The characters' irritating voices, on the other hand, are intolerable and having Tails give a high-pitched commentary over each boss battle is enough to have you tearing the DS in half.



The hedgehog joins forces with the cat in an unusual lesson in videogame anthropology.

With its gorgeous appearance, pseudo-3D boss fights and suitably frustrating gameplay however, there's an arguable case that *Sonic Rush* is the blue hedgehog's finest outing yet. Only the test of time will determine whether it has what it takes to dethrone *Sonic 2,* but nevertheless, this is a dual screen experience no one should miss out on.

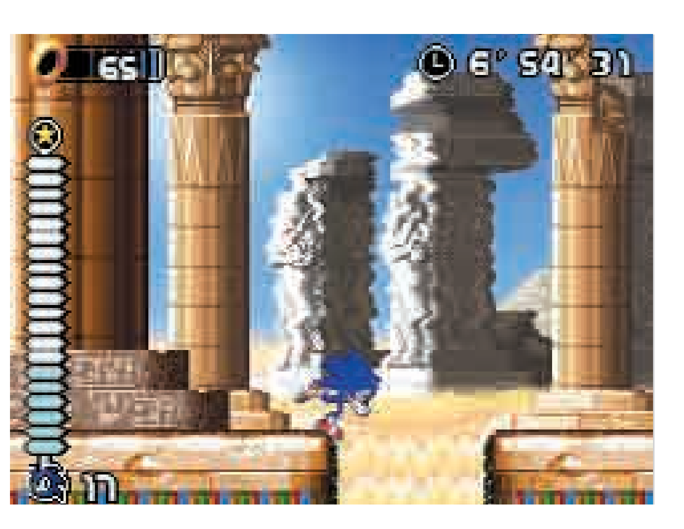
games™ CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

DOUBLE SPEED: Link up to another DS for downloadable head-to-head races. Using Blaze the cat and her alternate abilities opens up new possibilities for tackling *Rush's* mesmerising levels.



VERDICT 8/10
SUBLIME AND RIDICULOUSLY FAST



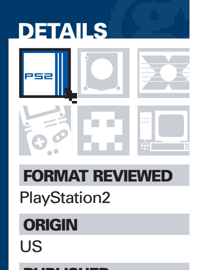

eMag



The third in the series has a much improved offline game, but it's still not perfect.



DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2
ORIGIN
US
PUBLISHER
SCEA
DEVELOPER
Zipper Interactive
PRICE
$49.99
RELEASE
24 February '06
PLAYERS
1 (2-32 Online)

ONE PROBLEM DOWN, ANOTHER PROBLEM TO GO…

SOCOM 3: US NAVY SEALS

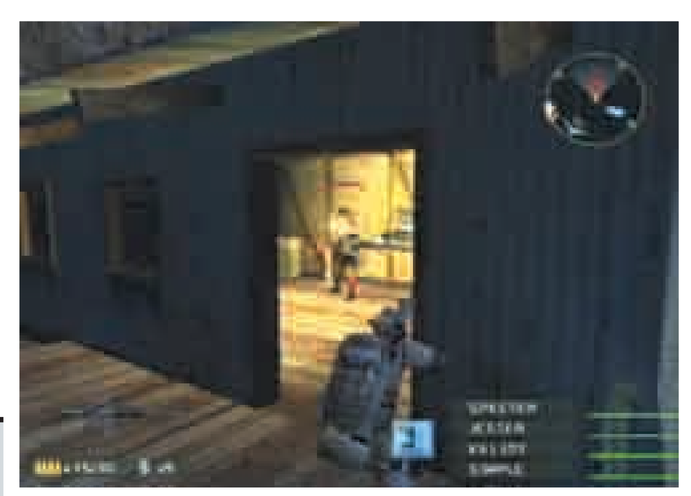
So the problem isn't with the controls after all. Squad shooters have been plagued with control issues since the genre crossed over from PC keyboards to console pads, as developers struggled to find room for you to defend yourself and order your team around at the same time. *SOCOM 3* has come up with a solution that's painfully obvious yet has somehow eluded the genre: map the most popular commands to one button, then tie the rest back in the sub-menus. With a wide scope of context sensitive options, the only time you even need to dive into the sub-menus is when you have a very specific order, such as breaching a door with a flash and bang manoeuvre or covering certain targets. Easy, simple, effective.

Another bugbear also solved in *SOCOM 3* is that the AI of your team is surprisingly competent. They follow most orders to a tee and are able to differentiate between passing soldiers and genuine threats when giving a 'Hold Fire' order – especially important given the abundance of stealth missions. Your companions still struggle with ladders and you'll occasionally see a team-mate taking fire without responding, but such glitches are rare enough that they don't become a problem. In a strange reversal of fortune for the genre, the AI of the enemies you face isn't as sharp as that of your team-mates, offering little more resistance than running left, running right and occasionally firing in your area. It's a shame but not a fatal flaw, as what the enemy lacks in brainpower and tactics it makes up for in firepower and numbers.

Developer Zipper has also graced the game with vehicles ranging from land-based trucks and Humvees to gunboats for river missions. It's a simple addition that really enhances the experience, it feels like there are more options available to you when formulating plans and ideas, rather than being constrained to the most obvious point of attack. Admittedly, the vehicles make a mockery of Zipper's claim that the levels are five to six times larger, given that most of that extra space is reserved for driving from checkpoint to checkpoint, but overall it's a decent addition to the series.

So no, for once the problem isn't with the controls. Where *SOCOM 3* falls down is the actual missions themselves – that other vital element of squad shooters. Every level can be broken down to a rudimentary 'go here', 'blow this up', 'go here', 'eliminate resistance' formula with little effort to disguise it. Even the stealth missions

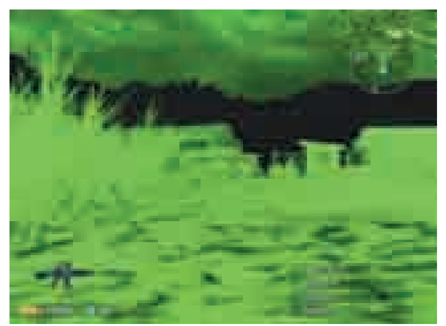
Oh, Mr Terrorist… when will you ever mend your evil, evil ways?



LINE UP FOR DUTY

As with its two predecessors, *SOCOM 3* is proving hugely popular in America thanks to its online play. The gameplay changes to the offline play carry over online too – Escort missions are replaced by vehicle-based Convoy missions, where terrorists try to guide cargo trucks to a loading bay while the SEALs team tries to destroy the trucks. However, an important change has been made away from the gameplay in the form of Credit Card verification. If someone is caught cheating and is banned for it, they're going to have to find a new credit card to re-register – an interesting way to clamp down on cheaters.





Night vision is handy, if a little old hat in this day and age…

fall into this pattern, with the end result still being that you stick an explosive to the arbitrary target and then scarper for cover. It's uninspiring and you see through the pattern after only a few hours.

SOCOM 3 is also far too easy. *SOCOM 2* was criticised for being too hard and the blame was attributed to the lack of checkpoints. In this one you can't walk a few feet without bumping into another checkpoint – which also tops up the health for your entire team – so at worst you'll lose a few minutes of play when you snuff it. The result is that you'll mindlessly charge through each mission with little regard for your own health or that of your team knowing that you'll never be overly punished for doing so. No level ever really excels at scratching the strategy itch, as you can get by using a slim range of orders and without thinking too hard.

Even on the stealth missions when accidentally raising the alarm means having to deal with more soldiers, the feeling isn't so much panic as it is, 'so what?' – more cannon fodder to plough through, more shooting action to be had. In many ways, deliberately raising the alarm does away with the inconvenience of stealth and allows you to carry on with the mindless carnage, with the only obvious signifier telling you that you didn't follow orders to a tee coming in the end-of-level rank.



With so many checkpoints, it's doubtful you'll have much trouble finishing this one…

It's a damn shame, really. *SOCOM 3: US Navy SEALs* manages to correct the traditional fault with the genre's controls but then only succeeds in proving that there are deeper problems still to be addressed. Once again, the series finds itself leaning heavily on the online play to keep its fanbase happy. Going on this evidence, *SOCOM* is getting closer to nailing the offline element of squad shooters but hasn't quite made it yet.

VERDICT 6/10

CLOSE, BUT NOT CLOSE ENOUGH

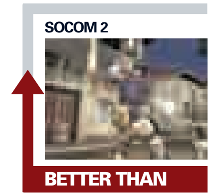
FAQs

Q. IS IT TOUGH?
The controls are easy to get to grips with and checkpoints are plentiful. In other words, no.

Q. IS IT INTENSE?
Not really, mainly for the reason given above. Firefights are frequent but end quickly.

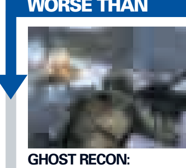
Q. IS IT ONLINE?
Yes, but there's also an LAN option, for those who can be bothered with the logistics of setting it up.

SOCOM 2



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



GHOST RECON: SUMMIT STRIKE

THE FESTIVAL OF SILLY HAIR AND BROKEN ENGLISH CONTINUES…

YU-GI-OH! NIGHTMARE TROUBADOUR

games™ ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ON THE CARDS: A host of new cards make for some interesting and personal deck possibilities.

LOST IN TRANSLATION: Eg: "Let's already return" and "I will stop going out because slowness today."

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Konami

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-2

You might not realise it but *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is probably the most expensive hobby a kid can have these days. With a single booster pack of five cards costing £2.50 and the more powerful and sought-after cards fetching upwards of 50 quid, the Pokémon TCG boom of the mid Nineties has been well and truly usurped as the best way for a person to haemorrhage money at an astonishing rate. And considering the mark-up on a few pieces of shiny card and the insane amount of other must-have branded tat floating around, some people out there are getting very rich off the back of six letters and three punctuation marks.

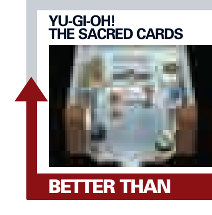
As a cost effective solution, *Nightmare Troubadour* allows you to put together decks of legendary proportions at the expense of time not cash. This is a perfect example of how the unique features of the hardware can be played up rather than shoehorned inappropriately. Tapping the bottom screen sets or plays cards, selects options and even navigates the world map while the top screen is used for statistics and slightly unnecessary 3D battles. There are enough cards to ensure that your deck can be perfectly adapted to your style of play and even the simple narrative shunts the game along in style, even if it is one of the most lazily translated titles in recent memory.

Sure, it's something of a guilty pleasure, but like many of its card-based cousins, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is the kind of thing many people will turn their noses up at until they accidentally fall foul of its inherent charms and subtleties. This DS debut offers more of the freedom and personalisation of the real-world card game than the GBA versions while at a fraction of the cost of some bits of card. The AI is still a bit wayward, throwing away cards for seemingly no reason when defeat seems imminent, but with the amount of battling you'll be doing, such mishaps are relatively uncommon. As addictive as a crack, nicotine and caffeine milkshake (but far better for you), *Nightmare Troubadour* is a game you'll want to play for hours but have to hide under your mattress when you have friends over.



You'll see your home quite a bit – you're forced to return to it at the end of every day. Great.

YU-GI-OH! THE SACRED CARDS



BETTER THAN

JUST LIKE

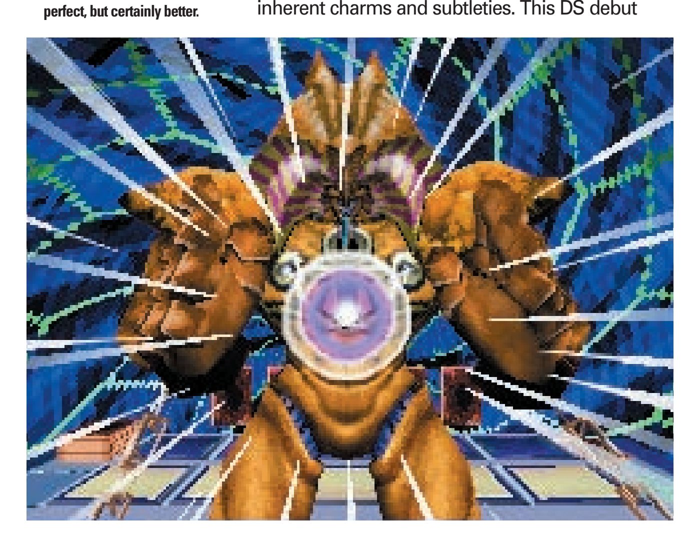


BEING 12 YEARS OLD

VERDICT 7/10

GOOD, WHOLESOME CARD-BASED CRAZINESS

Monsters now appear in 3D, which is nice – it's not perfect, but certainly better.

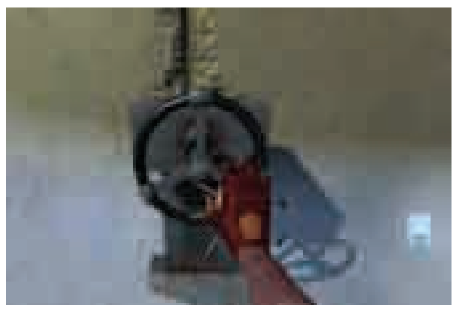




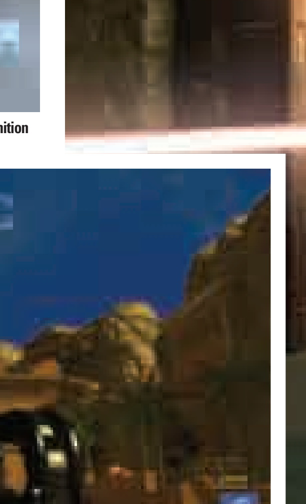

eMag



Just one of Jo Dark's many gadgets – the oddly named Locktopus allows you to break locks that you couldn't just shoot off. Obvious, really.



Managed properly, the all-powerful plasma rifle has limitless ammunition – handy when those never-ending spawns of enemies keep coming.







MACE GRIFFIN: BOUNTY HUNTER



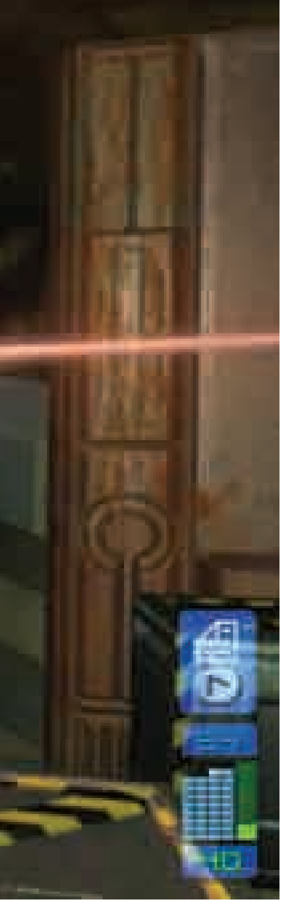
BETTER THAN

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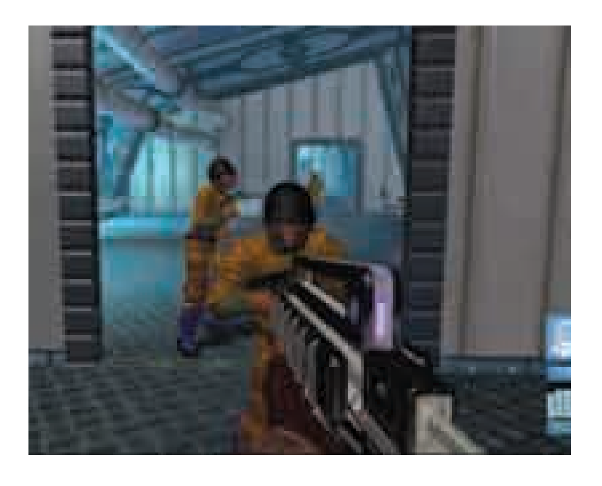


PERFECT DARK





Dodging helps you get away from enemies, but doesn't stop them shooting you.





PERFECT DARK ZERO

THE XBOX 360'S HALO? HARDLY…

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

ORIGIN
UK

PUBLISHER
Microsoft

DEVELOPER
Rare

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-4 (2-32 Online)



375 million. Apologies for stating the obvious but that's a hell of a lot of money, especially to spend on a developer such as Rare, who you'd hardly call prolific. There can be no denying that the UK-based firm has created some of the most important and best loved games in years but since the buy-out, we can't help but feel that Microsoft's investment won't have been recouped – with *Grabbed By The Ghoulies* and *Conker* both failing to light up the charts, and *Kameo* likely to follow suit (despite being among the better 360 launch games), all eyes fall on the return of Joanna Dark to catapult Rare back into the Major League. Pity, then, that pretty much the whole game just makes you want to put on your best super villain voice and say something along the lines of, "Ah, Miss Dark. I've been expecting you – expecting you to be a damn sight better than this…"

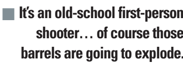
A crucial problem with *Perfect Dark Zero* – even in the early stages – is the artificial intelligence or, more accurately, the distinct lack thereof. While the odd enemy might have the brains to use whatever cover is available, most firefights just involve moving the crosshair left and right repeatedly while your cretinous foes shimmy for their lives and occasionally fire off a few rounds. Better still is the confusion among enemies that is shockingly prevalent for such a crucial title. Foes can be found inexplicably firing at walls, stopping dead for short-lived one-way ceasefires and turning blind eyes to comrades falling around them, among other curious mishaps. And the fundamental frustrations don't end there.

Whether an attempt at realism or just a stupid mistake, *Perfect Dark's* hit detection and weapon balancing have no excuse for being as weak as they are. Pinpoint Headshots often either whistle by and alert the would-be corpse or simply shatter the target's body armour for no reason. Meanwhile, an unarmoured foe can happily take a clip of handgun ammo to the chest and walk away while the plasma rifle – an apparently weak weapon, if the in-game stats are to be believed – takes down seemingly any rival in a single shot and has pretty much infinite ammo to boot.

With just a single checkpoint per stage, the latter missions of *Zero's* clumsily compiled Story mode can get incredibly frustrating, requiring lengthy replay sessions over several objectives should either you or one of your idiotic-yet-narratively essential allies take one bullet too many. This won't usually be a problem though; Joanna's new-found ability to go all third-person in order to dodge or take cover combine with a recharging health bar to make keeling over a rather unlikely occurrence until the game's later stages. The evasive roll works well enough, but poor implementation of cover use makes it pretty tricky to employ consistently. If you do manage to find a sweet spot, you'll be able to take aim at your more-than-likely strafing foes from relative safety before popping out with a few rounds with which to hopefully do them in.

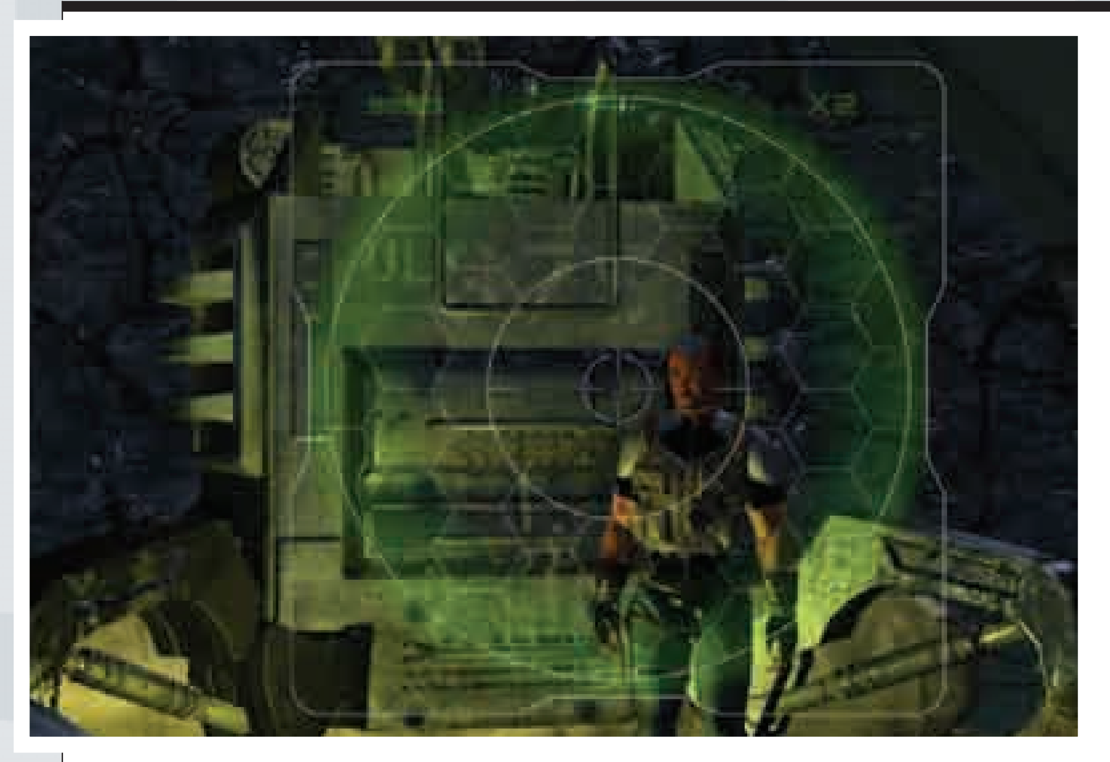
With negativity rife so far, though, it seems only fair to give Rare its due at this juncture and celebrate those elements of the game that aren't critically broken. The glorious spread of

"THE GLORIOUS SPREAD OF WEAPONS IS PERFECT DARK'S SLEEVED ACE, COVERING A CONVINCING ARRAY OF MODERN AND SCI-FI FIREARMS"



It's an old-school first-person shooter… of course those barrels are going to explode.

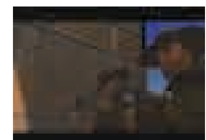






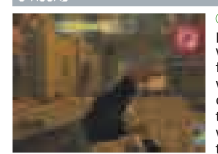
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

15 MINUTES



Still buzzing from the training level of the game's opening period, you probably have it in your head that your 50 notes couldn't have been better spent. By all means, play on…

2 HOURS



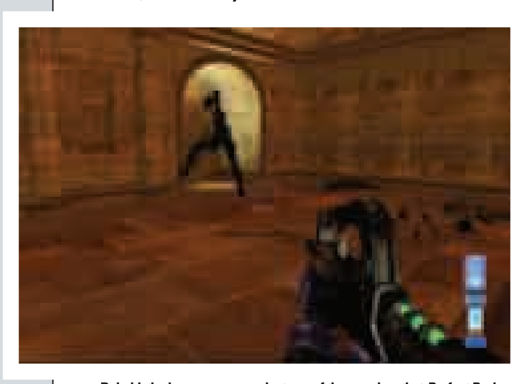
By now, you're noticing that the AI isn't up to scratch. Both enemies and allies flit left and right for want of better tactics and it's starting to get old. And annoying.

8 HOURS

Mission-critical personnel, combined with moronic AI is far from clever, and when a vital NPC dies yet again, thanks to a silly mistake, you will henceforth vow to play in multiplayer.

WHEN RAGDOLL PHYSICS GO BAD

While the dodgy physics often made for some odd death throws, we witnessed our favourite anomaly – the 'possessed corpse' as it has come to be known – on several occasions through the solo campaign. Basically, this rather silly glitch starts with a bit of a twitch on the part of the deceased. Nothing major, you might think, but then limbs start flailing and, intent on clinging to life, the still-warm body leaps up and bounces around much to the hysterical delight of onlookers. And as the body bounds around the level, careering about at breakneck pace and colliding with everything in sight, it's not just the player that gets confused. If you have any allies nearby, they'll even get jumpy and start pursuing or emptying clips into the possessee. Stunningly weak. You'll never be able to listen to *Dead Can Dance* again. Or at all, more likely.



Behold, the bouncy corpse – just one of the wonders that *Perfect Dark Zero's* marvelous physics allows you to have a good laugh at.

weapons is without doubt *Perfect Dark's* sleeved ace, covering a convincing array of modern and sci-fi firearms with several fire modes or uses for each. Finishing a level with a particular piece of kit allows you to use it in future missions – a well-worked pre-level equipment system lets you take a selection of your choice into each stage within the confines of a decent four-slot inventory. Pistols take up just one, while heavy weapons occupy three quarters of your available space, making on-site procurement a must for most assignments. A similar system is applied to your gadgets once you've cleared a mission once, opening up new routes through most levels and making your life that little bit easier. Again, great for replay value but the simple truth is that since a good half of the levels aren't that great first time through anyway, chances of wanting to play them again – especially the woeful escort missions – are slim.

Poor design choices render certain secondary objectives redundant and while other issues are addressed by the gadget choice when returning to a level, your first play through will more than likely leave you somewhat cold. But fear not, because should you choose to wade

"PERFECT DARK ZERO IS A PREDOMINANTLY BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF SOFTWARE, BUT BY TODAY'S STANDARDS, THE SOLO GAME ITSELF SIMPLY DOESN'T CUT IT"

through the silliness of *PDZ's* single-player campaign, you're rewarded with the biggest anticlimax since *Halo 2* just… well, stopped. The last level is, to be frank, an absolute mystery – how anyone thought it would make a fitting finale for such a high profile title is way beyond us.

On the multiplayer front, the thrills come in two main flavours – simple out-and-out deathmatches or team games and so-called Dark Ops modes, a selection of themed options cribbed from the FPS elite. For the former, you'll be able to cut your teeth offline against bots, learning key item locations and spawn points to your heart's content. But given the lack of comprehension and awareness displayed by the Story mode AI, you'll not be surprised to learn that bot support doesn't stretch to these slightly more complex modes. That doesn't stop them being great fun when played against real-world opponents, though. There can be no denying that *Perfect Dark* triumphs in most of its multiplayer modes, especially the well-implemented co-op play. While there are missions where player two will feel slightly surplus to requirements, others cleverly dish out another essential role to play, meaning you might start in a different part of the level or have differing objectives to Jo. A great inclusion – especially since you can team up over Live as well – and a surefire way out of a tight spot if you come across a problem mission in single-player.

Perhaps most curious of all is the fact that it's almost exactly the antithesis of the original *Perfect Dark*. When released late in the N64's life, Joanna's first outing was a great game for the





CHOOOOOON!

Swinging wildly between nu-metal silliness, generic stealth tunes and bizarre wah-laden soft porn themes, *PDZ's* soundtrack is nothing if not varied. Music changes when something big goes down – guitars kick in when it all kicks off because your stealth isn't up to scratch for example – and you can usually tell how hectic a section is going to be from how mental the soundtrack is. Most levels' scores play on the game's main theme, using different instruments and moods with the same basic patterns to change the feel accordingly. Given that Rare has used similar techniques to good effect in previous games like *Banjo Kazooie* and *Conker*, it's hardly surprising – less so than the fact that the game's nightclub only has a single banging tune. Oh well.



On the plus side, at least Rare has done a great job of making the game look incredibly pretty. Well, mostly.



Jo is a rather fragile creature, so standing out in the open probably isn't the best course of action now, is it?

time and yet was held back by hardware restraints that saw the game grinding to slideshow pace in places. By harsh contrast, Rare has seen no such difficulties making *Perfect Dark Zero* a predominantly beautiful piece of software for shiny new hardware, but by today's standards, the solo game itself simply doesn't cut it. Rare's decidedly retro FPS is a tenuously bound volume of 14 independent missions that are more memory tests than skill-based proving grounds – it could perhaps be commended for taking this route were it not for the fact that the *TimeSplitters* series (famously – and on this occasion ironically – created by ex-Rare staff) is more together in almost every imaginable way.

Not without its finer points – among them moments of graphical glory, a seriously tight arsenal, splendid multiplayer and plenty of replay value for those that can be bothered – *Perfect Dark Zero* is an erratic experience and yet one that is certainly worth sampling. It'll no doubt be lauded as the best thing since sliced *Halo* by many of those that lightened their wallets to the tune of 50 quid but this simply isn't the case. For starters, 'sliced *Halo*' doesn't even mean anything, but that's by the by – Rare's return to the genre in which it hit the big time so many years ago has far too much quality competition for it to be considered anything more than passable for the lone gamer. Oversights, inconsistencies and outright calamities in key areas hold back what would otherwise be a perfectly competent shooter. It's a shame really, since parts of the game are genuinely enjoyable and imaginative enough to forget about these flaws for a good few minutes.

Continually proving itself to be a real mixed bag in terms of offline play, *Zero* should at least keep Live servers – where the game's crucial errors are all but eliminated – busy and entertained until Master Chief rears his helmeted head once more.

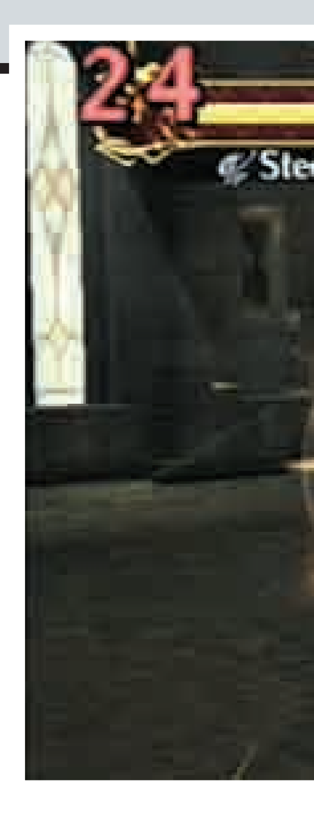
VERDICT 6/10
THE EMPEROR'S NEW VIDEOGAME

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY MISSIONS?
14 in total, ranging in size from a few minutes to a good half hour later on.

Q. ANY VEHICLES?
Indeed. You'll get to play around with hovercrafts and jet packs. The former handle miles better than the latter…

Q. BEST BIT?
The meaty weapons… and by a fair stretch. Pistols, assault and heavy weapons-galore mean that there's something for everyone.



FIRE EMBLEM: PATH OF RADIANCE

STRATEGIC FANTASY IS ALL THE RAGE THESE DAYS

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
GameCube

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Intelligent Systems

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
Out Now

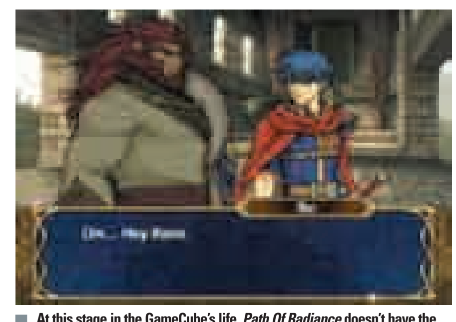
PLAYERS
1

The strategy RPG is a curious thing. From the unrivalled complexity of *Makai Kingdom* to the more accessible turn-based action of the Game Boy Advance *Fire Emblem* titles to the older *Shining Force* games, the genre certainly doesn't lack variety – and yet all SRPGs tend to be lumped into the same category and labelled as 'obscure' by the larger part of the gaming populous. It's easy to imagine someone browsing the shelves for a GameCube RPG, picking up this title and being very surprised upon getting home and starting it up to find an *Advance Wars*-esque, story-driven strategy game.

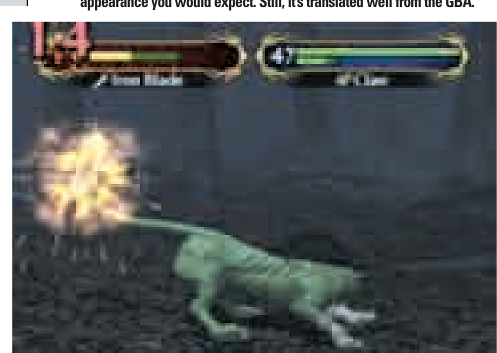
It's very unlikely, though, that anyone would be disappointed with *Fire Emblem: Path Of Radiance.* Indeed, fans of other *Fire Emblem* games will be absolutely delighted. What we have here is an accessible, challenging, varied and unique SRPG game with an engaging story and sustained lastability. *Path Of Radiance* charts the progress of a band of mercenaries caught up in a continental war and spans about 25 hours of strategic battling. Scenarios become increasingly complex as the game progresses; some of the later missions can take up to an hour to complete – more if you're adamant to get through the entire game without losing a unit. Series devotees will feel right at home, as this instalment features the familiar weapons efficacy triangles and unit types of the GBA games, but new players are also very well catered for with well-paced, skippable tutorials and three different difficulty levels.

That's not to say that *Path Of Radiance* does nothing new, though. In your new capacity as a General rather than a tactician, you must organise proceedings both on and off the battlefield. Awarding bonus experience, team support and outfitting is all handled between battles, which greatly facilitates actions such as equipping and purchasing new weapons. Gone are the days of sending a unit into a shop and then organising the dispersal of items on the battlefield. The bonus experience feature, too, is incredibly useful as it allows the player to award weaker or newer characters experience points off the battlefield, thereby making it easier to keep your team level. The ability to forge super-powerful weapons also helps to even things out if you're trying to level up a particular character. Chipping away at enemies' health in order to let your weaker units get the killing shot becomes very tiresome in the earlier games while the bonus experience eases the burden without making it too easy to beef up your team.

As usual, *Fire Emblem* is quite heavy on the storyline.



At this stage in the GameCube's life, *Path Of Radiance* doesn't have the appearance you would expect. Still, it's translated well from the GBA.



Once you lose a unit, that's it, they're gone forever…







THE PAIN AND THE GLORY

When units die in *Fire Emblem*, there are no magic spells and no resurrection options – they're gone for good. It's rare for a game to display the consequences of warfare in such a way. Losing a unit is much more than an inconvenience; it greatly affects team morale and therefore what happens in between battles. Let one of a family of three brothers die, for instance, and the other two will be badly affected; let your deputy die, and you'll have nobody to back you up during arguments. All of this means that the player's choices have a palpable impact on what happens in the story; it's not just losing a battle unit, it's losing a character, and that naturally has a diverse effect on the routes the game's narrative takes.

Of course, recruiting enemies and neutral warriors to your team via talking to them on the battlefield is as essential here as it ever was to the *Fire Emblem* series. The game also continues the series' tradition of defeated units disappearing for good – perfectionist players will find themselves playing levels through three or four times to avoid losing any characters along the way. It never becomes frustrating though, as with only a very few exceptions, unit deaths are always due to player recklessness rather than game imbalance.

Fire Emblem: Path Of Radiance differs from other games of this type in its flexibility. You most certainly don't have to use every unit within your power – should you wish to build up a team of extra-powerful knights or magic users rather than try to keep everyone balanced, you can. There are several ways to approach any given scenario and different players can play the game in different ways without being penalised for their personal preferences.

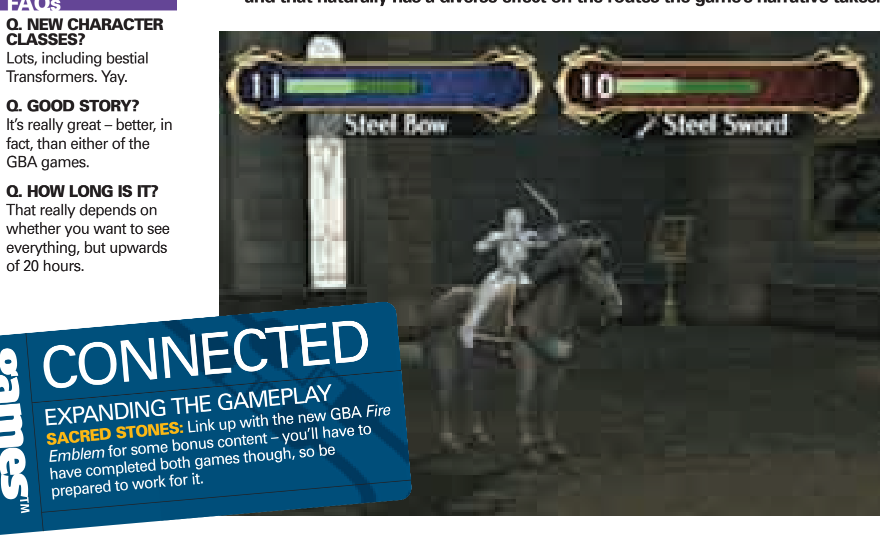
Indeed, the only thing that players could possibly malign about this title is the fact that it looks decidedly sub par. On the battlefield, repetitive and unspectacular battle animations quickly start to grate (although you can turn them off) and bland scenery and crude character models don't bring the game to life as much as they should. Off the battlefield, the story is told mostly through text and character pictures in the same way as the GBA titles. Although the few pre-rendered sequences that punctuate key moments look decidedly lovely, the rest of it looks nothing like a late GameCube title should.

FAQs

Q. NEW CHARACTER CLASSES?
Lots, including bestial Transformers. Yay.

Q. GOOD STORY?
It's really great – better, in fact, than either of the GBA games.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
That really depends on whether you want to see everything, but upwards of 20 hours.



games™ CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY
SACRED STONES: Link up with the new GBA *Fire Emblem* for some bonus content – you'll have to have completed both games though, so be prepared to work for it.

Ultimately though, the aesthetics don't matter much. *Fire Emblem: Path Of Radiance* has enough character, variety and replay value to delight fans and intrigue new players. Especially toward the end, the multi-layered storytelling really draws you in, and the sublime joy of a perfectly executed turn never fades. It's a shame that the visuals will let it down in the eyes of less devoted players, but aside from dodgy aesthetics it's a perfect GameCube translation of the series.



VERDICT 8/10
RADIANT, INDEED



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Sony

DEVELOPER
Namco

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
3 February '06

PLAYERS
1-4

URBAN REIGN

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHT TO PARRY

Over the last year or so, the old-school beat-'em-up has enjoyed a real comeback – while the likes of *Beatdown* and *Spikeout* may not be anywhere near as good as the original games from which they take their cues, there's definitely a revived interest in the genre. But even though demos and early impressions of *Urban Reign* suggested that it too would be cut from the same stuff, it's far closer to being a grittier, busier *Tekken* than it is *Final Fight*.

On first glance, *Urban Reign* falls somewhere between *Beatdown* and *The Bouncer* (hardly a favourable comparison), only without all the running around. The game's 'story' is simply 100 successive arena fights, each with its own criteria for clearing it; this could be a single target to take down in a crowd, a whole room to hurt up or a partner to protect. While there's just the one attack button, the combat is not dissimilar to that of *The Path Of Neo*, and although it does seem like a woefully simple feast of button bashing, extended play reveals some real combo potential. Taking a leaf out of *Tekken*'s book, this allows for some crazy juggle combos once you get a feel for using the left stick to determine which body height to attack. Knock an enemy up in the air with a running slide kick, bounce them around with a few punches and then finish with a big special combo attack or devastating catch throw.

While it does take its toll on the game's balancing somewhat, a comprehensive range of fighting styles really helps mix the action up. Story mode's main character Brad has his own varied style that borrows from several of the others, but most characters have more specific disciplines – kung fu, wrestling, submission, Muay Thai and general street fighting styles are among those on offer, each determining what strikes, grapples and team attacks will be performed by the fighter in question. Given the large-scale rumbles that the game is designed to cater for, there's a suitably strong array of multi-person attacks. Changing direction mid-combo allows you to divide the pain among several enemies at once, while using 'grab' in the right situation sets up big attacks that ruin two people at once, or you can always call in the services of an ally to really put the hurt on a single unfortunate.

But it's with the defensive manoeuvres that the fighting engine really comes into its own. The lack of a block button feels horribly unnatural at first, but a quick tap of the dodge button as a blow comes at you will let you duck out of the way, while adding a directional press as well lets you turn the strike aside. A similar system applies for throws – employing the same kind of escape inputs as *Virtua Fighter* – some grapples can be avoided completely whereas others are reversed. Aside from special moves,

Master the dodge move and you'll never have to scream at the screen again. Much.



Some of the moves you can perform look particularly bone-crunching. Ouch.





everything can be countered in some way. Even otherwise-unavoidable juggle attacks can be flipped away from, requiring absolutely perfect timing as a hit is about to make contact. The benefits are far greater than just avoiding damage; each dodge drains your rival's SPA meter (used for special attacks) and adds to yours, meaning you can duck and dive to wear opponents down before unleashing massive combo attacks to punish them for their inability to hit you.

The lack of co-operative play is a real oversight and the difficulty level will be enough to scare off most seasoned gamers on its own, but overall, *Urban Reign* is a solid fighter once you get to grips with it. It's clear from impressions and reviews from people who've played it (both around the office and online) that although opinions are firmly divided over Namco's latest, those with less love for *Urban Reign* tend to be those that don't understand its intricacies. While admittedly harsh, the artificial intelligence opponents can be beaten with a little patience, a lot of skill and a good knowledge of both your character and your rival. Despite its 'street' feel, the game is a lot closer to a traditional beat-'em-up – and a high-end one at that – in this respect and if you don't mind learning exact evade timings, sitting down and working out decent combos and maybe having to redo the odd stage when you get a little too ruined, *Urban Reign* is Namco's way of reminding us that fighting games don't have to be of the one-on-one variety to be deep, varied and skill-based experiences.



games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DON'T HIT ME: No block, no jump. Evasion is the order of the day here, and that takes expert timing.

SO MANY PEOPLE: The game allows for as many as six fighters to be duking it out at once.

BEATDOWN: FISTS OF VENGEANCE

BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS

DEF JAM: FIGHT FOR NEW YORK

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?
Urban Reign has a strong line-up of 60-odd fighters, including a few guest stars from *Tekken*.

Q. GOOD SINGLE-PLAYER?
Basic, but good fun nonetheless. AI can be a little on the disturbingly good side though…

Q. SO IT'S HARD?
Brutally. Enemies take you apart as soon as you're popped up into the sky, making countering absolutely essential to learn… and learn well.

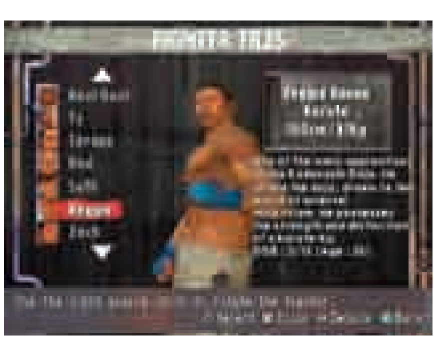
Sorry, Mr Napalm 99 – you have a silly name and must be punished accordingly. It's nothing personal, you understand…

FOUR TO TANGO

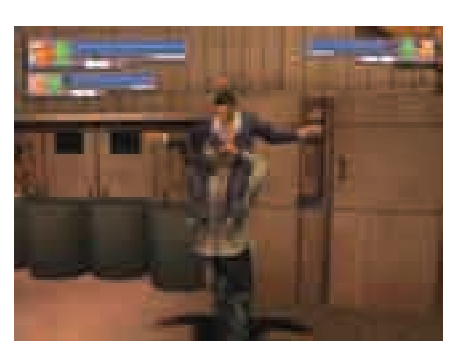
If you come up against a wall in the single-player game – and trust us, you will – it's probably time to hone your skills in *Urban Reign's* multiplayer modes. Playing a competent human opponent makes for very evade-heavy fights, on a par with something like *Dead Or Alive*, and you really have to know your character and work for the win. Three basic game modes are on offer but only the straightforward battles are really worth playing; the other two are too reliant on weapons to be considered much fun. But whether you're playing the computer or against friends via a multitap, four-player brawls are superb fun and be it a four-way scuffle or a team-based fracas, you'll keep coming back for more.



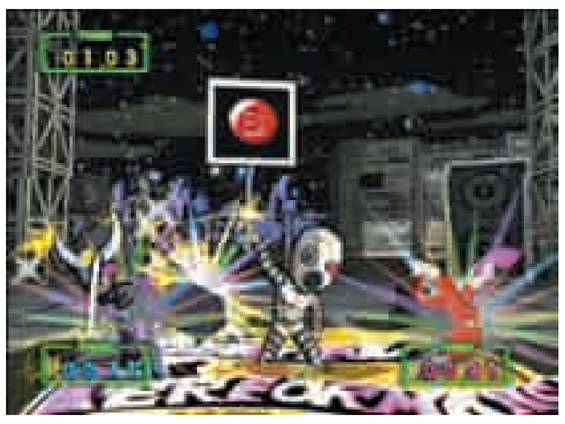
Tag team moves are a really great way of causing all the pain.



Hey, it's Reggie (insert joke about kicking ass and taking names here).



The floor, the walls, anything else… it's all there for the hurting, baby.





Come on, everyone knows the layout of the controller by now – this really isn't that tricky.



Red Viewtiful Joe vs Yellow Viewtiful Joe. It's the classic showdown we've been waiting for.

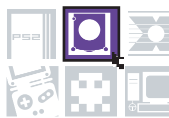


Sure, the mini-games look nice, but what about the main action?

VIEWTIFUL JOE: RED HOT RUMBLE

WE'VE NEVER BEEN LESS READY TO RUMBLE

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
GameCube

OTHER FORMATS
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Capcom

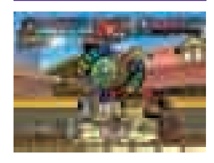
DEVELOPER
Clover Studio

PRICE
$49.99

RELEASE
February '06

PLAYERS
1-4

PSP $39.99 OUT NOW



When it's hard to see the characters on the GameCube version, you have to wonder why Capcom decided to move the action to an even smaller screen. Still, at least it all looks very pretty… what we can see of it, at least.

What's wrong with Capcom lately? Really, there has to be something seriously wrong with the lads and ladies that work so hard for the company, touting its usually oh-so special Japanese goodness. Although our hands still bear the marks from the back slapping that the company deservedly received for its efforts with such titles as *Devil May Cry 3* and *killer7*, the fond memories are now marred with ugly words such as 'beat' and 'down', the ill decision to 'treat' us to the UK-developed *Without Warning* and a wretched adventure featuring the now despised, Plasticine ex-favourite Jack Skellington entitled *Oogie's Revenge*. In short, it's become a company that certainly knows how to bring a chirpy games journalist down.

With this in mind, it was with a surprisingly happy heart that we peeled the plastic from our copy of *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble*. Viewtiful Joe… now there's a name you can trust. If we had an Uncle called Viewtiful Joe, he'd be our favourite – he'd probably take us fishing. Unfortunately, *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble* is a little like that lovely Uncle turning up one day when mum and dad are out, and then tempting you onto his lap with a packet of Starburst – or something. Yes, it has to be said that despite the *Viewtiful Joe* series being genuinely enjoyable and challenging every step of the way so far, *Red Hot Rumble* is a bit of a mess and we feel betrayed.

Taking the form of a *Smash Bros.*-esque platformer beat-'em-up, the idea is to compete against your enemies and pals (from both the other games and the Japanese animated series) for the lead roles in the movies that Captain Blue has decided to direct. Surreal? Yes, but that's what we've come to expect from the series and it's certainly the least of the game's problems.

The host of characters available are a varied bunch. Some are just very 'meh' while others seem hilariously unbalanced. It seems unfair to begin with, but you soon learn that what your character is capable of affects the outcome of the matches very little. You see, it all happens very quickly. A simple task such as 'collect the most gems' or 'be the last man standing' turns into a colourful bundle of everything, in which you struggle even to see where your character is on the screen – let alone what tat you're collecting – then some mini-games take place and you either win or lose. These mini-games are really the highlight of the confrontations, they take on a fair few forms and rely on a quick brain and even quicker fingers if you wish to emerge successful, but again, a loss can see you fall so far behind the pack that a catch up is unlikely – and so a new battle of balance begins.

This is, admittedly, a difficult formula to get just right, but in an effort to present a host of natty extras and stylish tricks, the basics seem to have been overlooked here. In the end, we've been denied the accessible title that we were hoping for and find ourselves wishing that, rather than pouring effort into this, Capcom had just concentrated on a third platform adventure.



HIDE 'N' SEEK

Every game needs a little something hidden within for the more persistent among us to track down, and *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble* is no exception. Throughout each of the movies are 16 hidden jigsaw pieces that need to be found so you can unlock the pesky V-Puzzle extras. Actually, the word 'hidden' isn't totally accurate. Puzzle pieces can appear randomly throughout levels – some just appearing once an enemy is downed – while others require a mini-game win to attain. This is actually quite frustrating as the unpredictable gameplay means you can miss a piece rather easily which leads to plenty of replayed stages and much annoyance.



In fairness, it's not all bad. If you're new to this kind of game then you're likely to have some fun – though we'd be surprised if there are many gamers out there who haven't actually sampled one of the *Smash Bros.* titles, which managed to do it so much better – and there's plenty to do for the eternally patient. In fact, once you get to grips with the fast-paced gameplay and erratic scoring, it's not nearly as offensive as it first seems and the fact that the VFX moves have been successfully implemented into the multiplayer action suddenly commands the attention it rightly deserves. We just wonder how many players will persist for that long.

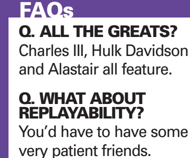
That said, the more eager *Viewtiful Joe* fans will be relying on an import rather than waiting until the February UK release and, having spent a pretty penny getting it into their bedroom, will be unlikely to give up on the title without a fight, instead searching rabidly for the fun that's contained within. But there are only so many excuses for poorness you can make.

FAQs

Q. ALL THE GREATS?
Charles III, Hulk Davidson and Alastair all feature.

Q. WHAT ABOUT REPLAYABILITY?
You'd have to have some very patient friends.

Q. A BIT OF A LET DOWN THEN?
Yup. We could easily cry.





games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

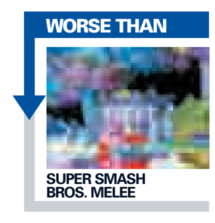
SLOW-MO: A vs option that makes good use of slow down and speed up power ups is good to see.
LIGHTS CAMERA: Making movies with friends and foes from the last two titles for no reason. Surreal.

DREAM MIX TV WORLD FIGHTERS



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



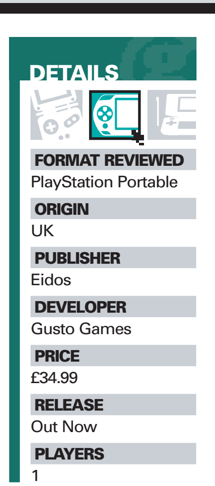
SUPER SMASH BROS. MELEE



VERDICT 4/10
FAR FROM VIEWTIFUL




eMag



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
UK

PUBLISHER
Eidos

DEVELOPER
Gusto Games

PRICE
£34.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1

AND NOW THE DESTINY OF YOUR TEAM IS TRULY IN YOUR HANDS

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER

Well, this is it. There's no longer any escape from the addiction that is *Championship Manager,* and those chilling hours of cold turkey – known to most of us as 'work' – can no longer keep the beast at bay. If you've felt the thirst for all things managerial then think seriously before buying this game because your life may never be the same again.

Championship Manager doesn't have the same life-draining effect on the PSP as the older PC and Xbox versions but it's still very, very difficult to put down. *Championship Manager 5* may have been the lowest point in the illustrious career of the franchise but the transition to the PSP hasn't seen the sacrifice of too much of the content. It's hard not to drag out the puns but the 'hands-on' management system has hardly been touched. All the same stats and attributes are in place with the same levels of emotional tantrums from the players, and glaring face of the media to deal with. The stresses and strains of tactical tinkering will stretch across a wealth of options, to what extent (if at all) is still down to the player.

The differing intensity between playing on a train and losing hours in front of a monitor hasn't been forgotten and it's easy to play through a season quite quickly. New challenge modes have been added such as keeping a rubbish team up or winning the title with an average side (think Newcastle), and these are fun to take on without losing your girlfriend.

Unfortunately several of the flaws have remained. Despite some considerate short cuts being added, it can still be uncomfortable to clearly navigate the menu system. The in-game engine is also disappointing and ridiculously difficult to follow. Even on the slowest speed the commentary and action can be badly out of sync, jumping around the pitch in sporadic and seemingly random jumps with goals frequently appearing from nowhere – why don't they just cut straight to the key moments like before?

Much as it can be loved, *Championship Manager* has lost its edge since the Eidos/Sports Interactive split, and as far as PSP conversions go, *Football Manager 2006* is more likely to be a back-of-the-net title for you than this. However, if you simply have to have more than one game providing you with management goodness, then you'll quite easily lose the winter on a *Championship Manager* high.

games™ GLOBAL
TAKING GAMING ONLINE
TRANSFER WINDOW: Stay up to date with the latest transfers with downloads beginning in January.
SIGN ON: 25,000 players from 55 playable leagues from 12 nations – trust us, that's a lot of transfers

WORLD TOUR SOCCER: CHALLENGE EDITION



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



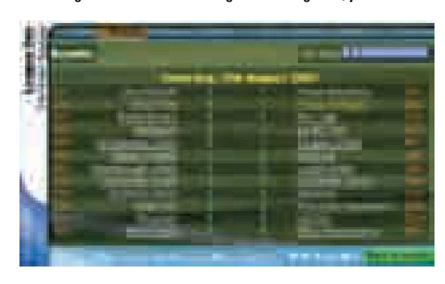
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2006 (PSP)



VERDICT 6/10
A FAIR PERFORMANCE BUT FAR FROM 110%

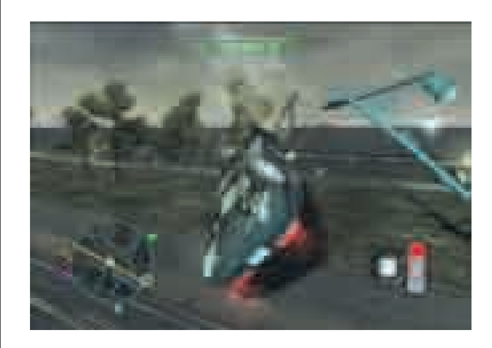


It's all about the tactics, you see – that and watching lots of little dots moving around on a bit of virtual grass. Thrilling? Hell, yeah.





Oh, come on… are you blind, ref? Our red dot was clearly nowhere near the green dot when it fell over – surely you can book him for diving?







That's right, Marcus – you just stand there. Probably the best thing for all of us if you never even think about moving again…

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

OTHER FORMATS
Xbox, GameCube

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Activision

DEVELOPER
Luxoflux

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1

TRUE CRIME: NEW YORK CITY

"EVERYTHING CAN CHANGE IN A NEW YORK MINUTE"

We knew *True Crime: New York City* was in trouble when we had to ask the question: 'This isn't preview code… is it?' There are only a few situations that cause an enquiry such as this to arise. It could be game-breaking bugs. It could be glitchy, patchy textures. It could be menus that don't work properly. Or it could be a camera that doesn't work at all. For *True Crime: New York City*, it was all four.

Much has already been written about Activision and Luxoflux's choice to replace the Asian American Nick Kang with ex-gangster and thugged-out cop Marcus Reed. However, despite looking like the bastard lovechild of Snoop Dogg and Rio Ferdinand, and having a penchant for screaming unnecessary profanities, Marcus is the least of *New York City's* problems. In fact, he's actually quite likeable. That is, when he's not glitching through walls, getting stuck behind cars or floating in mid air.

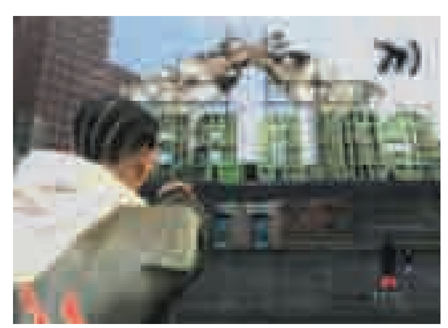
No, it's not Marcus that will have players eating their joypads in frustration. It's the fact that *True Crime: New York City* has hit shelves in a completely unfinished state. Once again, the city itself is a gigantic, flat, grid-based sea of dullness, but in a surprise turn of events, it's almost completely impossible to navigate. Ignoring New York's unfathomable one-way system (which lends itself as well to videogames as Hoddle and Waddle did to pop music), the driving engine is so unresponsive and wooden that even navigating the emptiest road takes Herculean effort. For no reason other than the fact that the game is fundamentally destroyed, cars will bounce around like rubber dodgems in one collision, and stick together like ugly magnets in the next.

Luxoflux has obviously taken heed of the criticism levelled at the LA of its previous game – that it was largely lifeless – and crammed NY with a phenomenal number of pedestrians and civilians. Normally, this would be considered good. But this is *True Crime: New York City*. Good doesn't know *True Crime: New York City*. The two are not friends. By cramming its world with people, Luxoflux has caused the engine to drag along like a sloth on downers, so that the Big Apple crawls past at two miles per hour, bending and warping all the way. Also, the entire city seems to have been coated in mud, making the game not only cripplingly slow but also as ugly as sin. Which is how we like our



SOUNDS OF THE CITY

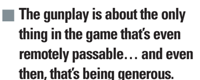
***True Crime's* one redeeming feature is its multi-genre soundtrack which manages to evoke a few *GTA*-style unique moments despite the game's cripplingly broken engine. The option to buy CDs at record stores around the city (adding tunes to your playlist) is inspired and some of the choices of song are superb. Finding an empty stretch of road – to avoid inevitably writing off your vehicle – and then burning down the tarmac to Bob Dylan's *Knocking on Heaven's Door* is genuinely gratifying. It's just a shame you have to return to the crushingly awful game.**





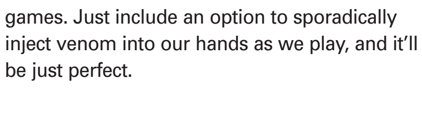






The gunplay is about the only thing in the game that's even remotely passable… and even then, that's being generous.

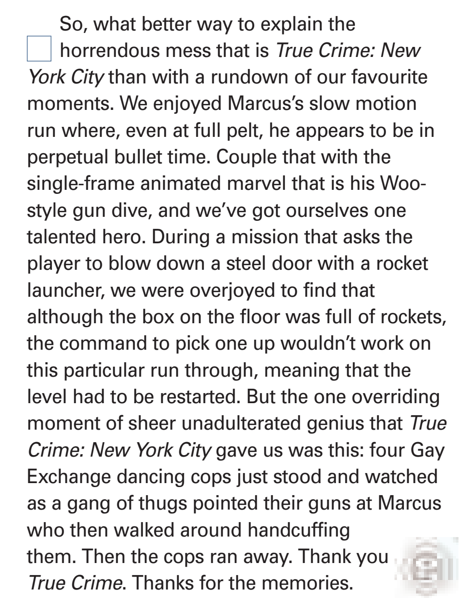
The whole 'pump criminals for info' thing has been done better elsewhere – thanks, *The Punisher*.



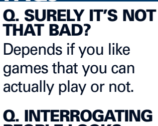
games. Just include an option to sporadically inject venom into our hands as we play, and it'll be just perfect.

Mercilessly, the missions are terrible, so anyone hoping to escape the torture of intercity travel will be sorely disappointed. Each one is seemingly plucked from the big book of clichéd level design, and features the usual mix of melee combat, car chases and gunplay. The hand-to-hand fighting is dreadful, focusing on the lost art of punching thin air and melding through scenery. The car chases are unsurprisingly terrible as they use the game's driving engine which has a half-second delay on input and thinks cars are made of latex. Thank the good lord, then, that gunplay is deeply average or we would be looking at a pretty awful package. Oh, wait…

The really depressing thing about *True Crime: New York City* is not its hideously generic warehouse level, its forced profanity or its insipid mission design. No, the most upsetting thing is that with another year in development, this could have turned out all right. There are a lot of nice ideas – collecting evidence, doing favours for informants, a lovely New York-themed soundtrack… but the game's so distressing to play that trying to extract any joy from it is as good as impossible.



So, what better way to explain the horrendous mess that is *True Crime: New York City* than with a rundown of our favourite moments. We enjoyed Marcus's slow motion run where, even at full pelt, he appears to be in perpetual bullet time. Couple that with the single-frame animated marvel that is his Woo-style gun dive, and we've got ourselves one talented hero. During a mission that asks the player to blow down a steel door with a rocket launcher, we were overjoyed to find that although the box on the floor was full of rockets, the command to pick one up wouldn't work on this particular run through, meaning that the level had to be restarted. But the one overriding moment of sheer unadulterated genius that *True Crime: New York City* gave us was this: four Gay Exchange dancing cops just stood and watched as a gang of thugs pointed their guns at Marcus who then walked around handcuffing them. Then the cops ran away. Thank you *True Crime*. Thanks for the memories.



FAQs

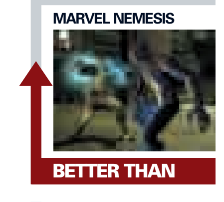
Q. SURELY IT'S NOT THAT BAD?
Depends if you like games that you can actually play or not.

Q. INTERROGATING PEOPLE LOOKS COOL…
About as cool as The Sahara.

Q. IS IT BETTER THAN GRAND THEFT AUTO?
You don't deserve to be asking us questions. Please leave.

VERDICT 3/10
A DIRE EFFORT THAT LEAVES A FOUL TASTE IN THE MOUTH

MARVEL NEMESIS



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

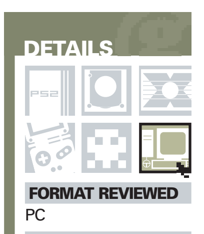


TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF LA

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE DARK SIDE

CITY OF VILLAINS

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PC

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
NCsoft

DEVELOPER
Cryptic Studios

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
Massively Multiplayer

MINIMUM SPEC
800MHz CPU, 512Mb RAM, 4Gb HD, Dial-up connection

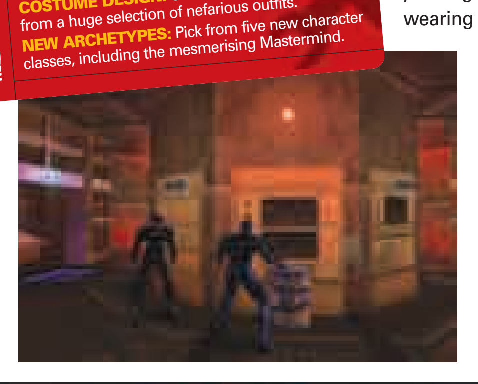
***City Of Villains* feels like more of an expansion than a true sequel, although you don't need to own last year's excellent *City Of Heroes* in order to play it.** The game does work as a standalone title in its own right, although there's no doubt that to get the best out of it you need to have *Heroes* installed on your machine too. What's nice, though, is that existing *City Of Heroes* players don't have to fork out for two subscriptions, because accounts can be upgraded to play *Heroes* and *Villains* for the same monthly fee. Nice one, NCsoft.

Naturally, *City Of Heroes* players will find a few things immediately familiar. Many missions in this 'sequel' amount to little more than tweaked retreads of those in the original game, only they've been given a villainous makeover – think planting bombs instead of defusing them and you get the idea. In addition, much of your time at the start of the game will be spent battling other villains and monsters – in other words, those who operate on the same side of the moral divide as you. Sadly, for a fair chunk of the story, heroes don't get much of a look-in.

The game does, however, regain points for enabling you to go out and find spandex-wearing do-gooders to beat up in an excellent new player-vs-player system, with which you can truly wage war on the powered-up armies of justice. Players who subscribe to both *Villains* and *Heroes* will get the most out of player-vs-player because joint accounts give you access to a varied selection of themed arenas, and if you're looking for one good reason to own both games, hero vs villain battles is it. This really is the only way to properly enjoy the new versus system, and the buzz you get from having your wicked avatar clash with Paragon City's soldiers of virtue is the purest distillation of what this franchise's ethos is all about: epic good-against-evil comic book mayhem. Unfortunately, things are less interesting for those who just own *City Of Villains*, because they're pretty much limited to fighting bouts against other villains in the Rogue Isle Arena. It serves as a decent enough introduction to the player-vs-player mechanic, but soon starts to feel redundant without that all-important moral dichotomy.

Alongside player-vs-player, base-building is the other grand new addition that lifts *City Of Villains* to new role-playing heights, because it's now possible to create your own fortress in which to develop plans for world domination. Villain lairs (or alternatively hero bases) are optioned once you form a Super Group and said group's actions have earned enough Prestige points. Once this has happened, bases are fully

games™ ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL
COSTUME DESIGN: Customise your evil avatar from a huge selection of nefarious outfits.
NEW ARCHETYPES: Pick from five new character classes, including the mesmerising Mastermind.

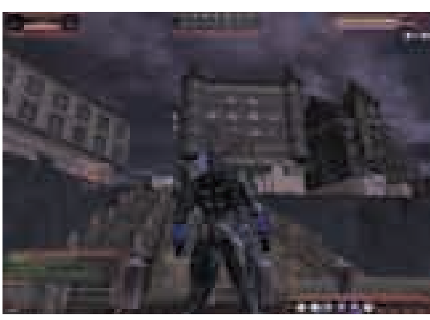


■ Despite the change in morals, much of the game is almost identical to *City Of Heroes*.



CLASS ACT

***City Of Villains* introduces five new classes to the game. Firstly, Masterminds have a low number of hit points but can summon minions to help them out in a pinch. Next, Stalkers can creep about in the shadows and deal out massive damage when least expected, making them a great choice for crafting ninja-like assassins. Dominators enjoy nothing more than messing with the brains of their enemies, and can paralyse foes at will, while Corruptors are the new ranged class, blasting out devastating attacks from a distance. Finally, Brutes take the opposite view and dive headfirst into scraps, getting meaner and more aggressive as scuffles progress.**



As before, your character can amass some particularly powerful… er, powers.

Heroes and villains together in the same city? The end result isn't going to be pretty…

customisable and can be tweaked to the smallest detail to reflect your needs. Build walls, excavate or elevate the ground, position hospital rooms and transporters – it's all possible. Plus, you can deck out your pad with gun turrets, traps and other deterrents to help discourage raiders – of which there will be plenty.

The game features five new villain archetypes on which you can build a unique criminal: Dominator, Corruptor, Brute, Stalker and Mastermind (see Class Act boxout). There are also stacks of new powers and costumes to enhance your scoundrels. *Heroes* sported a fantastic character generation system, but *Villains* takes it up a notch by enabling you to include all manner of extra evil features like hooves, claws, horns, metallic limbs and exposed brains. What's more, avatars look fantastic thanks to bump-mapped costume textures, which mean scales and metal look even more convincing. In most other areas, though, *City Of Villains* looks just like its predecessor. World textures look flat and low res when compared to the cutting-edge visuals in other recent releases, although the in-game architecture and huge sense of scale still manage to provide jaw-dropping cityscapes.

Ultimately though, the true test of any MMORPG is whether it provides that irresistible hook that keeps you coming back for more, and the good news is that if you enjoyed *City Of Heroes*, you'll have an absolute blast with this game – especially the player-vs-player onslaughts. There's just something beautiful about forming a villainous band, marching up to a bunch of superheroes and engaging in a brutal fight to the death. The pyrotechnics, animation and sound effects are astounding and won't fail to whip even the most sedate player into a snarling, screaming monger of evil. And if that's not good role-play, we don't know what is.



VERDICT 8/10

A DASTARDLY GOOD UPDATE TO THE COMIC MMPORG

GUILD WARS

BETTER THAN

JUST LIKE



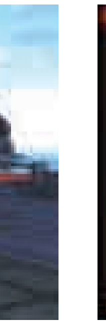
CITY OF HEROES

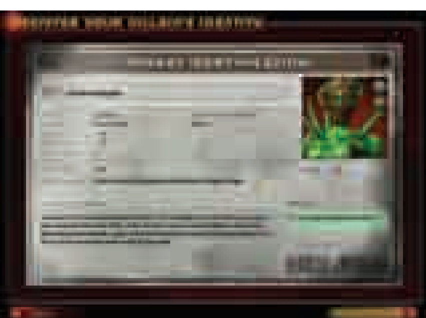
FAQs

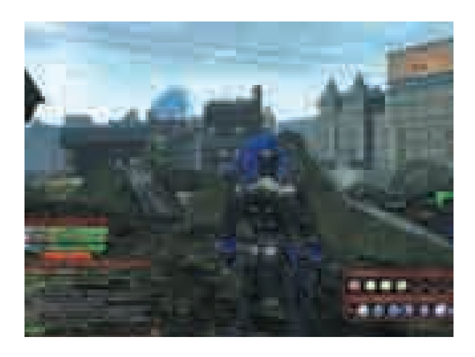
Q. CAN I HAVE A HENCHMAN?
You betcha. Play as a Mastermind and you can summon up a number of evil helpers with which to squash your foes.

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTER SLOTS DO I GET?
City Of Villains players get eight new slots, although if you also own *City Of Heroes* the combined number for both games is 12.

Q. SO CAN I MAKE 12 VILLAINS?
Yes, so long as you don't mind killing off all your hero characters. You can divide up the slots however you like.







SCREW BREAKER

"CALL ON ME – SPIN, SPIN SUGAR"

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Game Boy Advance

ORIGIN
Japan

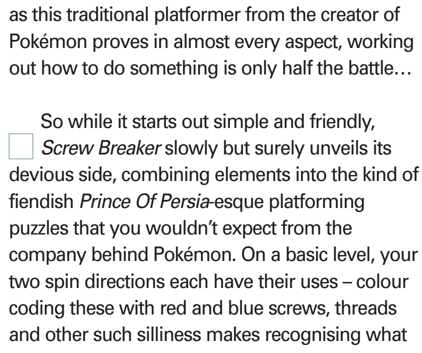
PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Game Freak

PRICE
¥3,800

RELEASE
Q1 '06 (Jap: Out Now)

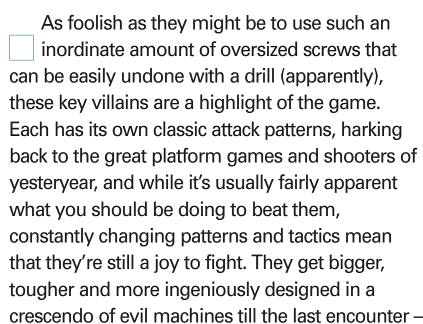
PLAYERS
1



JURASSIC PARK III: THE DNA FACTOR

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

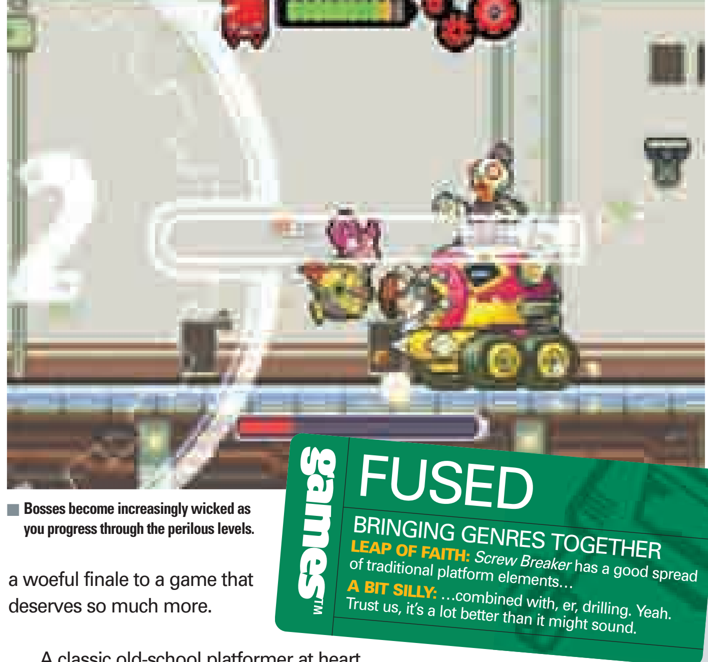


ASTRO BOY: OMEGA FACTOR

When are the bad guys going to learn? If you have a weak spot – be it a curiously compelling glowing light or an inexplicably exposed internal organ – cover it up. It's as if you want the forces of good to triumph over you. But as this traditional platformer from the creator of Pokémon proves in almost every aspect, working out how to do something is only half the battle…

So while it starts out simple and friendly, *Screw Breaker* slowly but surely unveils its devious side, combining elements into the kind of fiendish *Prince Of Persia*-esque platforming puzzles that you wouldn't expect from the company behind Pokémon. On a basic level, your two spin directions each have their uses – colour coding these with red and blue screws, threads and other such silliness makes recognising what to do usually pretty simple with the application of a little logical thought. Actually doing it, on the other hand, can take a fair display of digital dexterity. Springing from one block to the next while avoiding traps and enemies gets harder as levels become more cluttered with said hazards, and bosses get increasingly complex.

As foolish as they might be to use such an inordinate amount of oversized screws that can be easily undone with a drill (apparently), these key villains are a highlight of the game. Each has its own classic attack patterns, harking back to the great platform games and shooters of yesteryear, and while it's usually fairly apparent what you should be doing to beat them, constantly changing patterns and tactics mean that they're still a joy to fight. They get bigger, tougher and more ingeniously designed in a crescendo of evil machines till the last encounter – a woeful finale to a game that deserves so much more.



Bosses become increasingly wicked as you progress through the perilous levels.

games™ FUSED

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

LEAP OF FAITH: *Screw Breaker* has a good spread of traditional platform elements…

A BIT SILLY: …combined with, er, drilling. Yeah. Trust us, it's a lot better than it might sound.

A classic old-school platformer at heart with a few new tricks up its sleeve, *Screw Breaker* is a charming addition to a crowded genre, that stands proudly next to classics such as the *Mario Advance* games as well as the new generation of greats – *Gunstar Super Heroes, Astro Boy* et al. You'll go back to earlier levels with a tougher drill to reach new areas, upgrade your abilities and get to explore all manner of secrets once the admittedly curt game ends and the credits roll, all the while having all the fun. Just try not to injure yourself with that slightly unnecessary rumble pack.

VERDICT 7/10
UNIQUE, LOVEABLE AND GREAT FUN

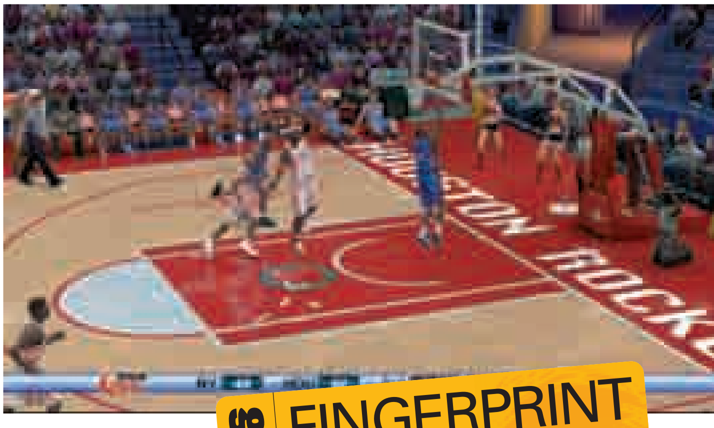
It might look incredibly cute and twee, but the game is more than a little devious.





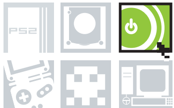



Player animation is scrupulous; too bad about the rather dodgy extra characters.



games™
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
ISOMOTION: Use the triggers and stick to create your very own tricks.
STICK AND ROLL : The shot stick allows for all manner of delicious dunks and lay-ups.

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS
Xbox, PlayStation2
ORIGIN
US
PUBLISHER
2K Sports
DEVELOPER
In-House
PRICE
£49.99
RELEASE
January '06
PLAYERS
1-4

NBA 2K6
NOTHING BUT THE BOTTOM OF THE NET

In the never-ending quest for photorealism, there lies a problem that is likely to rear its ugly head with growing frequency over the coming months and years. As immersion is increased through enhanced visual resonance, any break or tear in the fabric of suspension of disbelief will seem far more jarring than it has in the past. For all the effort that has gone into creating *NBA 2K6*'s scarily lifelike player models and beautifully fluid cloth physics, the second that it stands a near-perfect Lebron James next to an angular, grubby cameraman, this illusion is immediately shattered.

What about those player models, though? Surely the finest ever to grace a videogame, they are barely distinguishable from their real-life sporting counterparts; they move with finesse, power and strength, and followers of the sport will notice *Pro Evo*-style signature animations for some of the league's biggest superstars. Allen Iverson's trademark crossover, for example, is captured beautifully.

The game's incredible visuals add an extra layer of depth to a basketball engine that nears perfection with every yearly update. This year's 'Isomotion' system is a small revolution for sports games – utilising the two shoulder buttons as modifiers for the movements of the left stick. For example, holding the 'aggressive modifier' trigger and moving the stick from left to right will perform a quick crossover. Snap the stick back again quickly, and it will change to a 'shake and bake' manoeuvre. It takes some getting used to, but after four or five matches it's possible to pull off *All Star*-standard moves with ease, and they're all the more satisfying because they come as a result of skilful play rather than a canned right stick animation. Instead of having the second stick as a bastardised trick device, *NBA 2K6* allows it to be used for shooting and stealing, lending itself to all manner of lay-ups, dunks, finger rolls and hook shots, and it works far better than, perhaps, it should.

In fact, the game's only real limitations are its similarities to its current-gen brethren. Aside from looks, it's an almost identical experience – even down to the incidental animations and cut-scenes. However, that doesn't stop it being a near-flawless representation of the sport and a wonderful way to show off the power of your new Xbox 360. Funny looking cameramen and all.

Now this really is basketball. It's deep, it's playable and it looks very, very lovely.



NBA LIVE '06



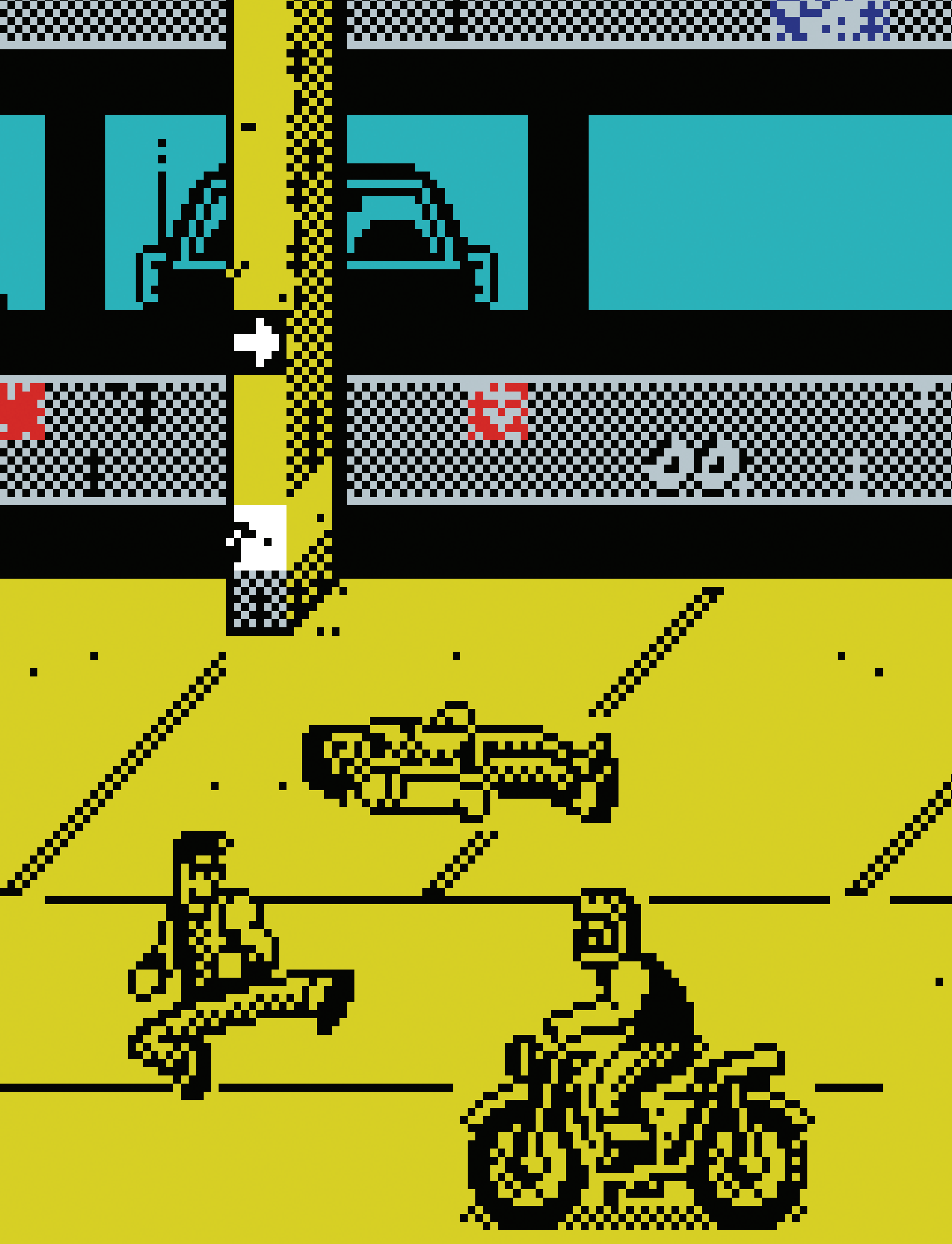
BETTER THAN

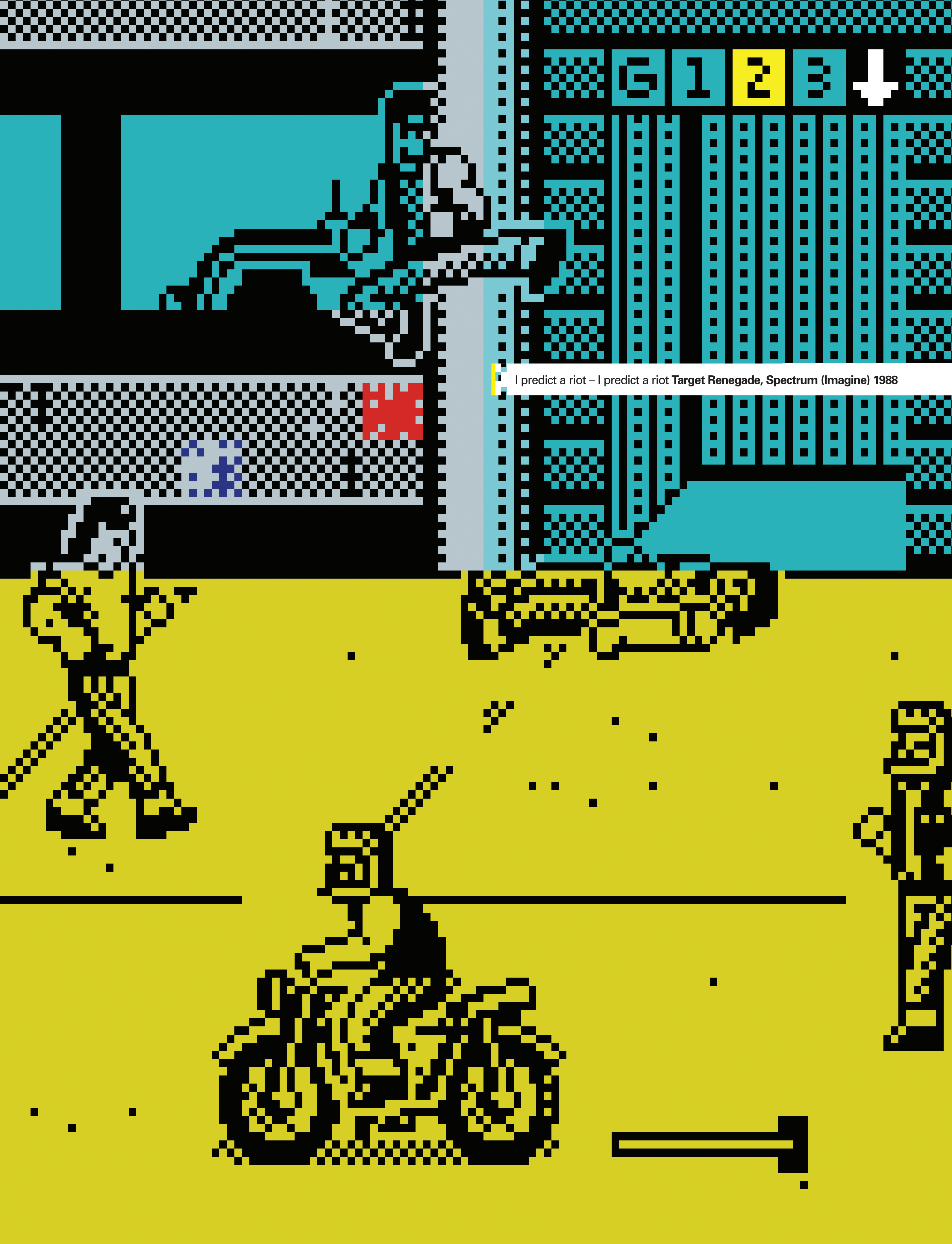
WORSE THAN



HAVING YOUR OWN REEBOK DEAL

VERDICT 8/10
A GORGEOUS AND VERY PLAYABLE BASKETBALL SIM





I predict a riot – I predict a riot **Target Renegade, Spectrum (Imagine) 1988**


eMag


RETRO
MICRO GAMES ACTION
A PARAGON PUBLICATION
NO.40 NOV 2005
00p
OUTRUN
A GREAT SERIES UNCOVERED
FRAK ATTACK!
An interview with Nick Pelling
THE SECRET OF MANA
Square's greatest ever RPG exposed
MEGA DRIVE
Why Sega's console was the hedgehog's knees
PLUS
RETRO NEWS,
GREAT GAME MOMENT,
BUYERS' GUIDE,
RETRO BOOK REVIEWS,
GAMES TIME FORGOT
AND MUCH MORE…

RETRO NEWS

Find out what's going on in the here and now of retro gaming

Maybe I'm being a little ambitious, but isn't it about time they started having tournaments for games other than the likes of Pac-Man and Space Harrier? Okay, so maybe it's better to have these things as pure contests of skill but even so, where are the world record holders for games like *Smash TV* (which, without wanting to blow my own horn, I rule at), *Pang!* or *Rodland*? It's not fair, really it's not – I'm convinced that the deck has been stacked. Still, at least we can all look forward to enjoy more of delights such as these arriving through the Xbox Live Arcade service… sometimes, you have to wonder whether it's worth coughing up £50 for a next-gen title when you can sit and play *Gauntlet* for hours (online with your friends), all for less than a fiver. Bargain? Oh, hell yes. In other news, we should prepare you for the gigantic undertaking that is next month's issue of Retro and, specifically, the first half (and only the first… and that takes up a whole ton of space as it is) of the Greatest 100 Retro Games Of All Time. You voted for them, and now we're going to bring you the results… soon. Not now, though. There's a whole month to go before all that…

Martin Mathers, Editor

GAMERS RACE TO BECOME THE GREATEST PAC-MAN PLAYER EVER

CHOMP CHAMP?

Namco celebrated Pac-Man's 25th birthday by holding a pan-European *Pac-Man* competition on 18 November 2005 at its London office at Namco Station, County Hall. With the initial qualification round yielding representatives from five countries (Greece, France, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany) for the grand final, the scene was tense; Germany was knocked out at the first hurdle, with France and Greece also falling by the wayside. Ultimately, the UK and the Netherlands went head-to-head to determine the European Champion and after a short five minutes of intense chomping action, Fazli Kandemir eventually beat our own courageous Phil Sheriff by 54,450 points to 48,770, and thus Kandemir was declared the new Euro Chomp Champ. For his troubles (and love of the popular pill-munching game), Kandemir was awarded a lavish trophy and a 25th anniversary edition Pac-Man arcade machine, presented by Namco's executive director, Masaji Okubo; we snagged him shortly after his win for a few quick questions…



gamesTM When did you first discover *Pac-Man*? And did you ever imagine that you would one day be a European champion at this game?

Fazli Kandemir When I was a boy, I think it was the early 80s. Since I discovered *Pac-Man*, I have been playing this game, from the arcade machine through to the mobile phone version. I never expected that one day I would be the official European Champion. I knew that I was a good player and a fast learner though.

gTM In your opinion, what elements of *Pac-Man* give it that long-term appeal?

FK For me, it is the high score that I want to beat. If I don't succeed, then I will play it again until I beat it. I am not a good loser and I always want to win, so I play for hours and hours.?

gTM How tough was the competition?

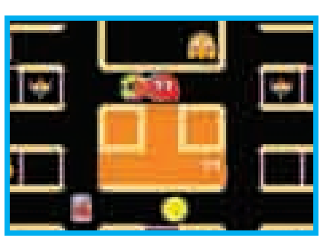
FK The tournament was not actually that though by itself, but the media and the cameras made it so. Some of the players became very nervous.

gTM Do you have any playing tips for any Pac fans out there?

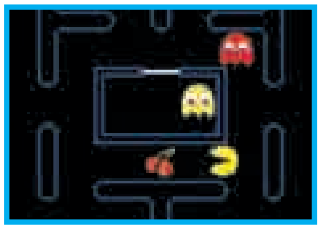
FK My winning tip is to always be yourself, don't lose your concentration and… practice, practice, practice.

gTM Would you defend your title if the opportunity came up?

FK I would defend my title if the opportunity arose. I would also like to become the World Champion of *Pac-Man* too!

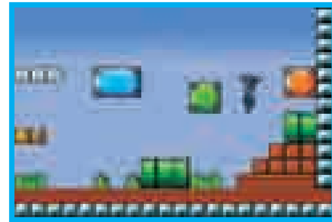


▲ Pac And Pal – officially not as good as the original.



▲ Cherries aren't the only fruit you know, Pac-Man…





GO PLAY CAPCOM

MORE RETRO GOODNESS FOR YOUR HANDHELD

You'll soon be able to play Capcom greats from yesteryear on the go thanks to the pending release of the *Capcom Classics Collection Remixed*, due out in March 2006 (though initially released in North America) for the PSP. This collection is said to include no less than 20 games in total, with the renowned classics *1941*, *Street Fighter II* and *Strider* being the star attractions of the show. With some neat additions thrown into the mix, such as the potential for wireless multiplayer action and a choice of several aspect ratios for the screen including normal, stretch or its original vertical orientation where appropriate, it's looking to be a must-have retro collection for Sony's portable beast.

Aside from the three titles already mentioned, the compilation will include *Avengers, Block Block, Captain Commando, Magic Sword, Quiz & Dragons, Three Wonders, Varth* and some other 'bonus' content. But if they chuck a *Mega-Man* or *Resident Evil* game in there, then we'll be the first to import it. We've sent our news hounds round to sniff out more information on this one, and we'll be reviewing it as soon as we can. Until then, just keep a beady eye on Capcom's official site at www.capcom.com?

OLD, BUT NEW, BUT OLD

NEW HOMEBREW RETRO TITLES ON THE WAY

There's yet more homebrew software for those ancient home computers on the way thanks to CronoSoft and Protovision. The first notable title is by Jonathan Cauldwell, skilfully combining a traditional 2D platformer with Bingo action in the form of the rather warped *Loco Bingo*. Navigate a train around the screen, shunting the numbered carts (that match your 'bingo' card at the top of the screen) and depositing them at the bottom of each level. This game will soon be available for the ZX Spectrum for just £2.99 plus postage from www.cronosoft.co.uk for the real media, or www.download-trader.com for the emulator file.

For the Commodore 64, Protovision has not one, not two, but three whole new games lined up for the aged technology. In no particular order, there's the impressive puzzler-come-platformer *The Adventures Of Jim Slim In Dragonland*; the warmongering strategy game *Advanced Space Battle*; and a nifty little *Combat* tribute for up to four players, called *Tanks 3000*. These games will be disc-only and are only available directly from the web-shop at www.protovision-online.de. Prices are yet to be announced.



▲ ***Bingo Loco***, **the game for the ZX Spectrum that combines bingo with… er, loco?**

Retro DIARY

As old-school gaming gets increasingly more popular, it's about time everyone knew about upcoming retro releases and events…

FEBRUARY '05

Breath Of Fire III

Date: 10 February **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** £29.99 **Format:** PSP

We're suckers for classic RPGs and although Capcom's *Breath Of Fire III* isn't exactly old (it originally came out on the PSone in 1997), it's still good enough to warrant an inclusion here. There's even a new online game-sharing mode so you can play with friends – could Capcom be any more generous to us retro gamers, eh?

Castlevania Double Pack

Date: TBA **Publisher:** Konami **Price:** £TBA **Format:** GBA

Konami kicks off its new range of 'two games, one cartridge' packages in February with the release of some great Castlevania titles: *Harmony Of Dissonance* and *Aria Of Sorrow*. Yes, so they're relatively new but the gameplay is pure old-school harking back to the greatness of *Symphony Of The Night*… and that's most definitely a good thing. If you've never played through these before, you'd do well to pick it up.

Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max

Date: 24 February **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** £29.99 **Format:** PSP

Alpha, Zero… it makes no difference to us what they call it any more. The bottom line is, we'll soon get to beat each other all over again at once of our favourite 2D beat-'em-ups, all thanks to Capcom's old-school dedication to the PSP. We just hope that the controls are up to it…

MARCH '06

Capcom Classics Collection Remixed

Date: TBA **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** TBA **Format:** PSP

Look! Up there! It's a whole news piece on this, and yet you still want us to tell you more about it? You just want the moon on a stick, don't you? Well, there's not that much information right now, so we're kind of let dreaming instead - for instance, a wi-fi enabled version of *Magic Sword* allowing for more than one player would go down incredibly well. Are you listening, Capcom… well, are you?

TO BE CONFIRMED '06

Extreme Ghosts 'N' Goblins

Date: TBA **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** £29.99 **Format:** PSP

We're not sure if this is such a good idea for a remake, to be honest. *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* was ridiculously hard in its original form, so we can't imagine things being any different this time around… surely that's going to result in more than a few broken PSPs before the day is out? More than likely – those with no gaming skills should steer well clear.

Sega's Treasure Box

Dates: TBA **Publisher:** Sega **Price:** TBA **Format:** PS2

Details are still sketchy but we can tell you that *Treasure Box* is set to include some of Treasure's greatest 16-bit moments. *Gunstar Heroes, Dynamite Headdy* and *Alien Soldier* have been confirmed, but we hope more games will be added. Hell, we'd give our neighbour's left kidney (ours is much to valuable) for Treasure's complete back catalogue on one shiny disc. Let's just hope Sega doesn't disappoint.

If you know of, or are hosting, any retro events, please contact the magazine's editor at gamesTM@paragon.co.uk

Retro

Retro

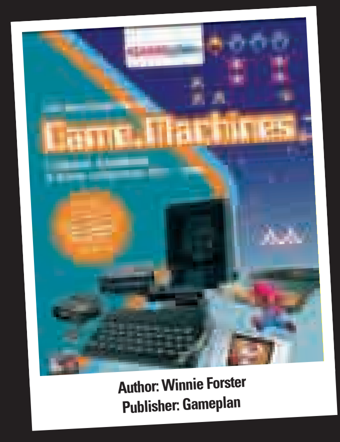
A SELECTION OF TITLES THAT

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GAME MACHINES

Compiling an encyclopedia of game machines is always going to end up a thankless task. There have been so many triumphs and glorious failures down the years that you're inevitably going to annoy part of your intended audience with a focus on certain consoles at the expense of others. *The Encyclopedia Of Game Machines* is a book for the casual gamer; anyone who joined the videogame revolution around the time of the PSone will no doubt learn from Forster's book, although older readers will almost certainly frown at consoles such as the Sega Game Gear being afforded only a single page of coverage, or the entire history of the all-conquering Super Nintendo being washed over in only four pages (although these do include some nice pictures of the Japanese Modem as well as the Nintendo Satellaview which allowed programs to be downloaded onto flash cartridges).

Another thing that may annoy is the bizarre console scoring system. Obviously any starring grade is going to be open to argument, but does the Dreamcast really only deserve four stars and why is the PSP dismissed so easily with only a two-and-a-half-star score? It's a strange system, and one that perhaps doesn't quite fit with the historical grounding of the content.

On the plus side however, the book features a huge number of pictures of not only the consoles themselves but also those games likely to bring back good memories from the days of *Pong* right up to the Nintendo DS. Perhaps the £18 price tag is a little steep but certainly as far as putting everything in one place, this one holds its own rather well.

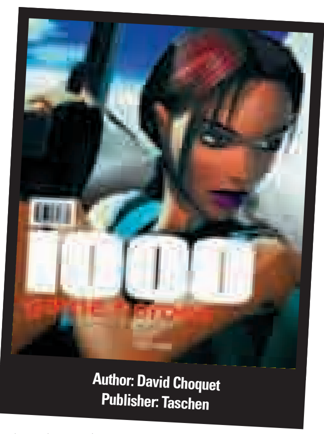


Author: Winnie Forster
Publisher: Gameplan



1000 GAME HEROES

If you have any interest in art or pop culture then you'll no doubt be aware of the Taschen label, a collection of coffee table tomes that consist of a minimal amount of text but a huge collection of striking imagery throughout. Not surprisingly then, it just goes to show how far things have come in the world of videogames when some of the pixellated world's biggest icons have now been immortalised in a Taschen volume of their own; any gamer with a smattering of taste (and a large enough coffee table to display it on, considering the size of the damn thing) would do well to keep this on display for all to see. It seems fitting, somehow, that the PlayStation's number one pin-up Lara Croft should adorn the cover, but thankfully the book doesn't obsess over the virtual female form, giving as much emphasis to the aesthetic beauty of *Pac-Man* as it does to the faux lesbianism of *Fear Effect*. Split into sections such as Fearless Heroes and Legends Of Video Games, it's the more cinematic games that benefit most from the glossy treatment – memorable franchises such as *Zelda, Castlevania* and *Silent Hill* are among just some of the standout moments contained within the pages. Admittedly, some of the more generic artwork such as that from *Tekken* or *Virtua Fighter* is unlikely to hold your attention for long, but the breathtaking art of games such as *Oddworld* or *Final Fantasy* really does earn its place in this virtual art gallery. Perhaps not 1,000 classics as promised on the cover then but certainly more than enough to make this worth picking up – and it's also good to see gaming being taken more seriously for once. As for us, we'd happily pick Klonoa over the Mona Lisa any day…



Author: David Choquet
Publisher: Taschen

VERDICT 4/5

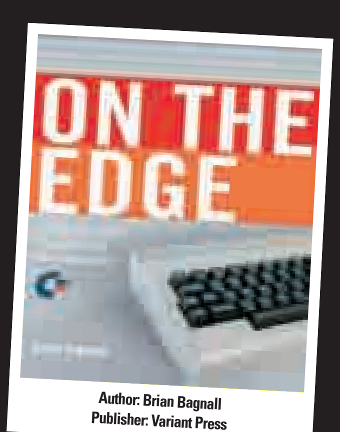
Reading



WILL SERVE YOU WELL WHEN THE POWER'S GONE OUT...

ON THE EDGE: THE SPECTACULAR RISE AND FALL OF COMMODORE

The history of many of the biggest names in computing would no doubt make for dry reading, an exercise in number-crunching tedium. However, that's certainly not the case with Brian Bagnall's excellent account of the rise and fall of Commodore that reads more like a rock 'n' roll memoir than the story of a big electronics firm. This completely true-to-life tale has it all – inter-company wrangling, acts of stupendous hubris, a cast of colourful characters and, of course, the classic success that was the Commodore 64. These stories don't just involve harsh words either; many of those involved actually came to fisticuffs during their career and there are a number of stories about people high up in the company eventually being barred from the building by the same security guards that once protected them. It's almost akin to an entire series of *Dynasty*, considering the amount of back-biting, behind-the-scenes wrangling and general shenanigans that's going on throughout the whole thing. To say that we were surprised just how enjoyable this book was, then, is more than a bit of an understatement – there we were, expecting some kind of drawn-out historical recollection of sales figures and the like but instead, we got a rollercoaster ride of corporate monkeying and bitching to best anything the fashion world has to offer. Definitely worth a read if you fancy seeing the nastier side of the games industry, or haven't got the stomach to try whatever Jackie Collins has dreamt up lately.



Author: Brian Bagnall
Publisher: Variant Press

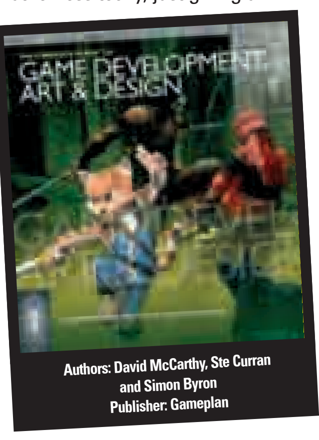
VERDICT 5/5

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO GAME DEVELOPMENT, ART & DESIGN

The cumbersome name may give you an indication that this isn't a book for the informal gamer or those who just want to look at some screenshots of the greats; rather, it's an account of how your favourite games get made, a technical look at a complex process. As such, a breakdown of how to design a videogame level, or a heads-up on the post production process will have you either yawning immediately or chomping at the bit to get hold of this book. No doubt you'll already know which camp you're in…

Granted, the earlier chapters are rather less techy, just giving a caption-based rundown of the most important and influential games of the last few decades, but this soon gives way to talk of programming and game design which will only be of interest to those trying to break into the industry or those already a part of it. There are a number of interesting Q&A sessions with big names such as Revolution's Charles Cecil and Sam Coates from Team Soho giving some decent insight into how some of the industry's biggest franchises were created. However, there are also some highly debatable sections such as 'Sequels That Got It Right/Wrong' which takes more than a few unnecessary swipes at the cinematic thrills of *Final Fantasy VIII*…

If you're looking for pure entertainment about the creation of entertainment, then this guide isn't really the best place to come – however, it certainly delivers everything that it promises and makes for an interesting read if you're keen to learn about the industry you love so much.



Authors: David McCarthy, Ste Curran and Simon Byron
Publisher: Gameplan

VERDICT 4/5



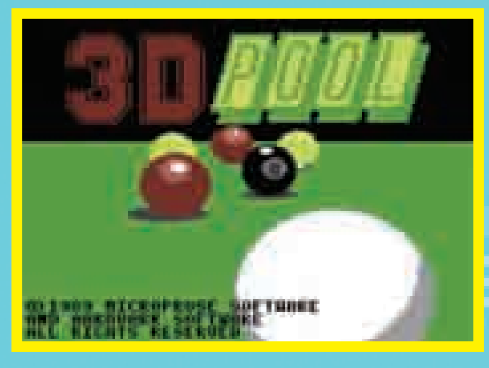
Retro Interview

COM. G

BACK IN THE 1980S, ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN BBC PROGRAMMERS WAS ORLANDO M PILCHARD QC – OR NICK PELLING TO USE HIS REAL NAME. PELLING MOVED ON TO OTHER MACHINES AND IS STILL IN THE INDUSTRY, SO ANDREW FISHER TRACKED HIM DOWN AND ASKED HIM ABOUT HIS PAST…

Back in the day when game development was all about the individual, it was rare to find a game that didn't have its creator's name splashed all over it – people wanted the recognition for their work and the respect from those who played it. And yet, that wasn't the case for Nick Pelling. Despite having beavered away on the likes of Frak!, 3D Pool and Firetrack, close inspection of those games would have led you to believe that it was Orlando M Pilchard and not Pelling that was responsible for them all… but he wasn't. Pilchard was a pseudonym invented by Pelling, in order to remain out of the spotlight that was the games industry at the time. Thankfully, Pelling now goes by his own name on the projects he works on (mainly on the consoltation front) so we managed to track him down and ask the man himself what it was like to be known as someone else…

PELLING GAMES







▲ Vertical scroller *Firetrack* had its own very individual look, including day and night sections and a constantly firing vehicle.

games™ Tell us how you started programming…

Nick Pelling Having been given an Acorn Atom for Christmas one year, I started playing with it by writing simple animations in Atom Basic… and it all kind of grew from there.

g™ Why did you use a pseudonym, at a time when programmers were beginning to gain fame?

NP I didn't like the way influential figures of the time (like Bruce Everiss) were promoting the industry to the media, and so wanted to stay out of that one-ring circus.

g™ You published your early games through Aardvark which was your own software label. Was it hard work?

NP A lot of work, a lot of problems – for example, I lost out when several well-known distribution companies crashed, which everyone else apart from me seemed to know was happening – for not a lot of money. I don't think my story is in any way atypical of what happened back then, though.

g™ You programmed for the BBC and C64, which both had a 65xx processor. Did you ever try to learn other processors, like the Z80?

NP Not until later, when I wrote for the Sega Master, Sega Game Gear and Nintendo Game Boy Color. Still, in a CPU bar brawl the lean, mean 6502 would always kick the Z80's fat, hairy arse.

g™ What was your favourite 8-bit machine to work on?

NP The BBC Micro – clean design, fast BASIC, good peripherals and a decent keyboard.

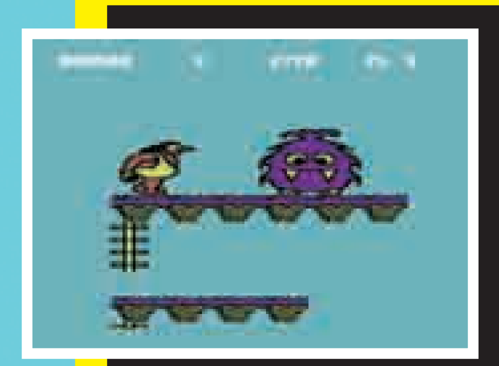
g™ One myth that has grown up around the classic platform game *Frak!* is that the caveman had originally said a rude word. Is there any truth behind this?

NP It wasn't me! A number of people inevitably felt inspired to 'adapt' *Frak!*'s graphics in some pirated versions: I think my old friend Andy Davis collected a good number of these, I don't know if he still has them; it's not a thing I've lost too much sleep over.

g™ *Firetrack* was an excellent vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up. What inspired the game?

NP For the same reason most games got written back then, I just liked that kind of arcade machine and wanted to play it at home. But then, once I started on the task, it took on a life of its own, developing its own logic – the patterns, the scoring, etc. For the look, I built a level editor and my good ▶



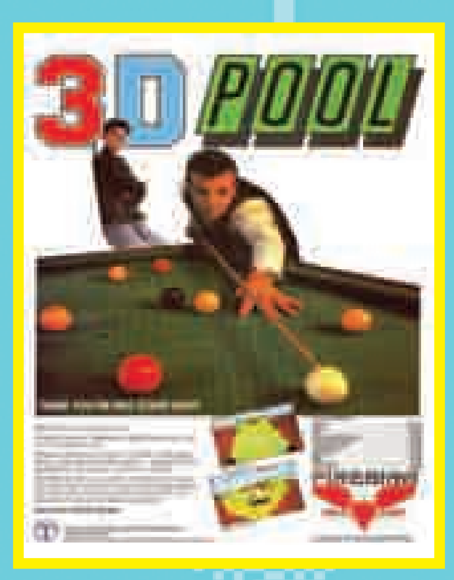


FRAK!

Did you know that hunters in the Philippines used the yo-yo as a weapon, to kill birds and small animals? Well, that's what Trogg the caveman is armed with as he makes his way round hazardous platforms suspended in mid-air looking for diamonds. Hazards took the form of flying enemies (balloons and daggers) as well as huge static monkeys and giant purple caveman-eaters.

Of course, colliding with anything or falling too far brought up the famous speech bubble. Many people complained that the gameplay was spoiled by too many 'leaps of faith', aiming for platforms that had not scrolled into view.

Unfortunately, *Frak!* put in an ugly appearance on the C64. The detailed graphics of the BBC original were turned into super-wide multicolour mode, and the smaller viewing window made your task even trickier. It also didn't have the *Captain Pugwash* theme tune, as found in the BBC version… what a shame.



"IN A CPU BAR BRAWL THE LEAN, MEAN 6502 WOULD ALWAYS KICK THE Z80'S FAT, HAIRY ARSE"

friend Ian Boffin designed the levels, filling them with subtle (and not-so-subtle) homages to his favourite arcade machines (*Pac-Man*, etc).

We did have some fun making it, though Activision/Mediagenic, perhaps, were less than proactive about trying to sell it – I'm not sure I ever got a royalty statement.

gTM *3D Pool* was an ambitious game to attempt on an 8-bit machine. The table rotated in 3D, light reflected off the balls and there was even a trick shot option. Were you pleased with the results?

NP It was fun to play, which is all I really look for in the finished item. I even got to play for real against Maltese Joe, who endorsed the product.

gTM The puzzle game *Loopz* was a clever mixture of *Tetris* and *Pipemania*. Are you particularly into puzzle gaming?

NP Speaking as someone recovering from a nasty long-term trains/planes addiction to *Tetris*, I think the answer would have to be yes. *Loopz* was fun but I must confess to being thoroughly sick of David Whittaker's bloody panpipes (straight out of *Shadow Of The Beast*, if I remember correctly) by the end of it.

gTM Did you work on any unfinished or cancelled games?

NP Many, many games get cancelled during development. I should, perhaps, have completed more games when I was younger (I even put a *3D Wars* demo on a magazine cover, before abandoning it) but really I guess I was too much of a perfectionist.

So yes, I've worked on lots of unfinished games (most recently *Unreal* on the PSone), and all the code is on a hard drive or CDR somewhere… but don't get your hopes up you'll ever see any of them. They tell me that 'their lawyers are watching', and I tend to believe them.

gTM You worked on compression/movie player software for the PlayStation, starting with the *X-Files* game. What are your opinions on interactive movies, and cut-scenes/video in games in general?

NP I think it's fair to say that interactive movies are nearly all dismal rubbish. *X-Files* on the PSone was a rare exception, in that its streamed video was genuinely atmospheric and the gameplay worked pretty well – both areas where most interactive movies seem to fall down horribly.

gTM How would you compare the modern games industry to that of the 1980s?

NP Like the American car industry in 1920 to the American car industry in 1900. Simply, it's a mature industry now but although some would say that it has now gone beyond maturity, I'm not sure that I quite believe in decadent readings of history. Certainly, in-game 3D modelling has become over-stylised and ultra-samey, and development practices have become rigidified – good for consistency but bad for 'spark'.

It's just a tragedy when works of genius like *Vib Ribbon* don't achieve the success they deserve – we're all the poorer for that.

gTM Much of your work has been in optimising and compression. Do modern programmers pay enough attention to these aspects of coding, now they have large storage media and fast processors?

NP I did some optimisation consulting on *Championship Manager 6* (PC version) for Eidos



▲ The man himself, playing a spot of real pool (as opposed to the virtual variety) at the launch of *3D Pool*. Pelling admits that he's pleased with the way the game turned out… clearly, the fans agreed with him.

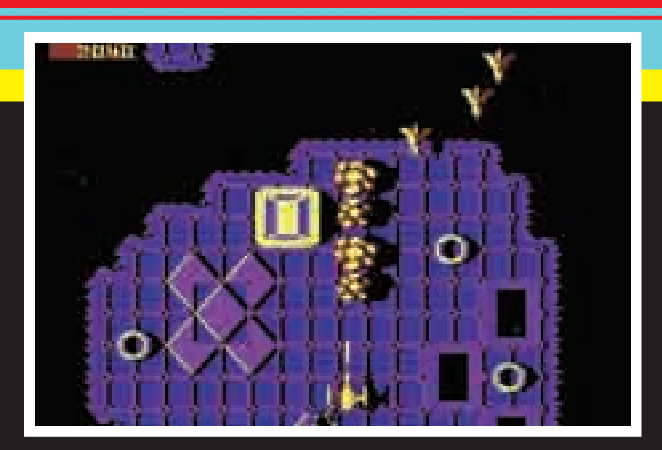
LOOPZ

Back in the Nineties, everyone was throwing shapes on the dance floor and moving shapes on their computer screen. *Loopz* was an underrated classic which saw action on the C64, Amiga and even the Atari Lynx (in a recent homebrew version). Cleverly, there's more than one way to play. As well as going for high scores and completed loops, there's a puzzle game (with a useful password system) where you're shown a complete shape and then given the pieces to recreate it. Graphics and sound are good but it's the challenge that pulls you in. As you progress, the pieces get bigger and there is an 'eraser'

FIRETRACK

If you've never played it, *Firetrack* is a vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up with an unusual look. Each level has day and night sections, and the scoring system involves shooting mathematical signs on the ground. These are added (and multiplied) up at the end of the level to give a bonus score. Another interesting aspect is that your craft fires constantly – you just have to line up with the bad guys (some of which are indestructible).

***Firetrack* appeared on the BBC and C64, and got good reviews. The one major drawback is the lack of power ups – games like *Gradius* (*Nemesis*) and *Delta* hit home computers that same year and showed that the way forward was extra weaponry.**



and Beautiful Game Studios recently. I certainly doubled – if not tripled – its effective underlying speed (though Steve Screech kept adding features to the match engine to slow it down again, bless him). So optimisation is still a big issue these days, even with clever compilers and fast processors. Thank goodness.

gTM Do you have any interest in retro gaming and emulation?

NP It's one of those things I do track – though not very actively – for example, I was quite pleased to see the MDDClone PC version of Paul Woakes' *Mercenary* series [which can be seen at http://mercenarysite.free.fr/merce.htm].

gTM Would you like to go back to your roots and code for old machines again?

NP My friend Carl Muller has been doing this kind of thing recently, but I'm not particularly envious. Doing high-speed Z80-style multiplies for the Game Boy Color a few years ago (for *3D Pocket Pool*) was probably as close as I'm going to get to that for a while.

gTM You have also coded for Game Boy and mobile phones. In your view, are these good devices for retro-style games?





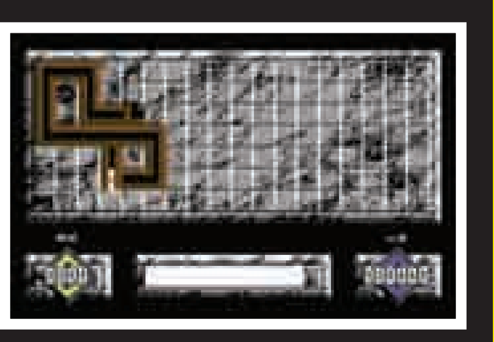
NP Good for whom? While there are a few examples of good retro, publishers seem just as happy with the glut of bad retro they've presided over (which is basically what most mobile shovelware is), but hardly anybody seems to see that in even the medium term, that shrinks the market for everyone. Oh well…

gTM What are your favourite retro/modern games?

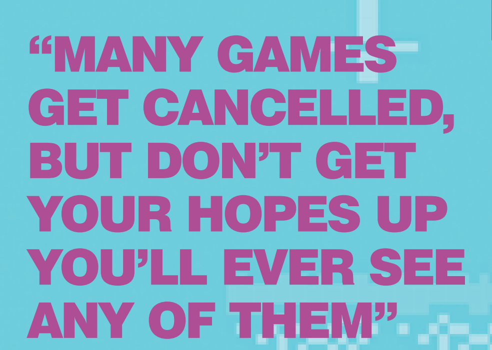
NP The single cultural artefact I would place on a space mission to an alien civilisation would be *Tetris* – the hands-down winner in my retro category by a light-year. The single best reason for handheld gaming.

For semi-modern games, I really like *NetCell* (especially the harder variants, like 8x1 and 9x0) – it's a dirty, rotten time-thief of a game, with a quirky social angle to it, mainly thanks to Denny (who runs the show), at http://www.freecell.com – highly recommended.

Modern games however, I'm not so sure about; to be honest, I haven't really played games full-on for a couple of decades (apart from the ones I've worked on), so I guess I ought to pass on this one out of modesty. Having said that, I guess *Vib Ribbon* ought to get my vote – and if I had a PS2, I'd be playing *Mojib Ribbon* right now.



that can remove joined sections in one click. It's a challenging game, for sure, and one that can keep you hooked for hours.



Hardware Le

Retro Feature

Machine Specifications

PROCESSOR: Motorola 68000 16-bit
LAUNCH PRICE: £189
SPEED: 7.61MHz
MEMORY: 64K, although cartridges could hold up to 4MB
SOUND: Yamaha YM2612, with six channels
GRAPHICS: 512 colours, up to 80 sprites and four planes, the MegaDrive's dedicated Video Display Processor could display a resolution of up to 320x240
SIZE 28.5 x 5 x 22.5cm

gend



SEGA MEGA DRIVE

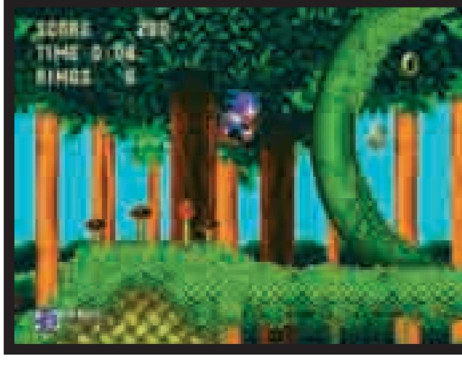
Once upon a time, there was a console manufacturer called Sega. And lo and behold, it was very successful as David Crookes discovers…

It's become one of the best known advertising slogans for a videogame company. In trumpeting its success and attempting to embrace new custom, Sega proudly proclaimed, "To be this good takes ages." And unlike most marketing spiel, this one had a ring of truth. Sega tried to beat the might of Nintendo's NES by launching the Master System, yet it had failed to make the impact it hoped for. The Japanese company tried its best – its 8-bit console had a faster processor than its rival and it was blessed with superior audio and more memory. But Nintendo still held more than 90 per cent of the videogaming market by the time Sega had turned its attention to a 16-bit successor.

Much of this failure to overtake Nintendo was down to timing. While the NES was released in Japan in July 1983, the Master System didn't arrive until October 1985. By that time, Nintendo had a foothold so strong that the only way to break it was to create something far superior and get it out first. Some challenge – after all, Nintendo was so firmly embedded in people's minds that many saw the brand as an umbrella term for all things videogaming in the same way people today see PlayStation as a catch-all phrase.

Yet there was a chink of light. Although the Master System didn't take off in Japan or America in the way Sega had hoped, it had sold well in Europe and Australia. That gave the firm the impetus to create its world-beating system, the 16-bit Mega Drive – a console which proved that the best things really do come to those who wait. Sega had been beavering away for ages to create its new console, learning from the Master System's failure to build up a huge library of great titles.

One of the reasons some believe Sega struggled in America and Japan was the lack of third-party support from developers. Many software houses were tied into strict, exclusive contracts with Nintendo and so couldn't develop for Sega which instead came to rely on European developers. The problem was that American and Japanese audiences were not seeing games which suited their tastes. The Mega Drive changed all that when it was released in Japan on 29 October 1988. Alongside the console were four games: *Alex Kidd And The Enchanted Castle, Altered Beast,*



Super Thunderblade and *Space Harrier 2*. And more was to come, many of which were conversions of Sega's coin-op games, including the popular *Golden Axe* and *Afterburner*.

Sega aimed to bridge the gap between arcades games and those created for its console and there were only small-ish differences between the two versions – to the untrained eye, at least. By releasing its new console ahead of Nintendo's Super NES – which, under the name Super Famicom would not be released in Japan until 21 November 1990 – the advantage had swung Sega's way and it wasn't about to mess up.

Sega distanced itself from Nintendo's image of games for kids. The Mega Drive was created to look great with its black, well-designed casing appearing very grown-up, and an ergonomic, three-button joypad which was brilliant for the earlier games. The message was clear: this was a machine for mature gamers. Nintendo could keep its under-14s, Sega was going for people aged 16 and over, those who didn't have to rely on parents for pocket money.

Sega wanted this message to be heard loud and clear across the world and followed the Japanese launch with releases in New York and Los Angeles in January 1989 and the rest of America in September (where it was called the Genesis due to a problem securing legal rights to the Mega Drive name). It was finally let loose in Europe in November 1990.

Not surprisingly, the Mega Drive was competitively priced. In Britain, it was distributed by Virgin Mastertronic and was initially sold for £189.99 complete with *Altered Beast* and a joypad but this dropped when Nintendo released the SNES here in April 1992, pricing it at £150. Sega's new release was also accompanied by an accomplished cinema and television campaign which portrayed its users as being older and wiser. It gave huge swathes of adults great confidence to go out and buy the console without feeling embarrassed.

"IF THE ADVERTS FOR THE MEGA DRIVE DIDN'T IMPRESS, THEN THE SPECS CERTAINLY DID…"

PC OR NOT PC?

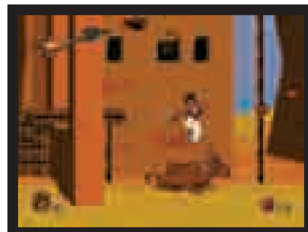
■ With sales of the Sega Mega Drive riding high, the Japanese company did a deal in 1993 with British manufacturer Amstrad. The result was a British PC-Mega Drive hybrid similar in concept to the Tera Drive released in Japan that had a Mega Drive in a 80286 PC; the machine was a regular 386sx PC, running at 25MHz with a 40Mb hard drive and 1Mb of RAM. However, the Mega Drive was integrated into the computer as a 16-bit ISA card and was accessed by a switch at the front of the computer. There was also a slot at the front of the machine into which cartridges were inserted and all Mega Drive games – even Mega CD ones – could be used. It also came with a VGA monitor, making it the only Mega Drive able to output in VGA.

Yet the machine cost a small fortune – a whopping £599 plus VAT – and so priced itself out of the range of the average console fan. A 2Mb 486SLC Mega Plus cost £799 plus VAT and for an extra £100, buyers could get a 130Mb hard drive and 4Mb of RAM. Not surprisingly, it was all still too expensive for the average gamer and ultimately turned out to be a massive flop for Sega.









And if the ads didn't impress, than the specifications surely did. In 1985, Sega had devised what it called its System 16 arcade system board used in coin-ops, for which around 40 games had been developed. When Hayao Nakayama, then Sega's CEO, was deciding on the Mega Drive's design, he ruled that the new machine had to be 16-bit and that games made for System 16 could be easily ported over, boosting the Mega Drive's games library.

As such, the Mega Drive was based around the 16-bit Motorola 68000 processor which ran at 7.61MHz in the PAL consoles and slightly faster at 7.67MHz in NTSC. There was a secondary processor, the 8-bit Zilog Z80 which ran at 3.55MHz PAL and was used as the main CPU when the Mega Drive was in Master System compatibility mode. Later models had 64Kb of RAM and an additional 64Kb of video RAM. It also had a boot ROM which checked games for a licensed code placed in games by developers in a bid to cut piracy – the cartridges could typically hold up to 4Mb.

Developers could chose up to 61 on-screen colours from a palette of

"THE MESSAGE FROM SEGA WAS CLEAR – THIS WAS A MACHINE FOR THE MATURE GAMER"

512 and they could display up to 80 sprites on screen, depending on the display mode. With a resolution of up to 320x240 for PAL and 320x224 for NTSC, games could be graphically very detailed, and interlaced modes boosted this further by doubling the vertical resolution. Meanwhile, sound was provided by the main six-channel Yamaha YM2612 chip, assisted by the Texas Instruments SN76489 chip in Master System compatibility mode.

Luckily for Sega, all of this meant that the vice-like grip by Nintendo was loosening as each successive market embraced the new console, with America and Europe in particular taking the machine to their hearts.

It may seem strange that we would get this far without mention of one of the most recognisable characters of the gaming industry, a face which sold thousands of Mega Drives and would help make Sega a household name, but in the initial stages, it was not *Sonic The Hedgehog* that was causing a stir.

Instead, the coin-op conversions and sporting sims were grabbing attention and Sega was becoming more aggressive in its marketing approach towards developers as well as consumers. It got American developer EA on board to knock out a series of successful sporting titles.

One of these, *John Madden Football*, became a classic must-have for people in the US, as both Sega and EA understood that Americans love their sports and were growing to adore computer games. The fact there was no equivalent game which came even close to *John Madden* – blessed as it was with great controls, brilliant graphics and superb gameplay – also helped matters. It followed that videogame versions of American football, ice hockey and baseball would be snapped from the shelves and this undoubtedly aided the success of the Mega Drive.

But, inevitably, we return to *Sonic*, released in 1991 as Sega attempted a



▲ Unlike the SNES, the Mega Drive's design was identical the world over.

BLUFFER'S GUIDE

■ Sega collaborated with Hitachi in 1993 to create the Sega Virtual Processor. The extra chip allowed the Mega Drive game to have improved graphics and was fast, with a clock speed of 23MHz, allowing 300 to 500 polygons per second, and was used in the brilliant *Virtua Racing*.



■ For great multiplayer action, Codemasters invented the J-Cart. It was basically a normal cartridge with two joypad ports built into it. Two players could plug their joypads into it and go head-to-head on *Micro Machines 2, Micro Machines '96, Micro Machines Military, Pete Sampras Tennis, Pete Sampras Tennis '96* and *Super Skidmarks*.



■ A much-mooted Game Gear adaptor to allow Mega Drive owners to play games created for Sega's handheld was never released. However, there was an adaptor for the Master System, while Master System games could be easily played on the Game Gear.







▲ The Mega Drive version of *Bomberman*, allowing up to eight players at once, is still considered to be the best.



OH, THE CALAMITY…

Sadly, Sega made some mistakes. Big ones. For instance, It developed the Mega CD which was built as an add-on to the Mega Drive. It was nothing more than a stop-gap measure until the next generation, and ultimately flopped.

Released in December 1991 in Japan, the Mega CD allowed gamers to play CD games and audio and it came in two guises – the first as a tray unit which fitted beneath the Mega Drive and the latter as a top-loading drive which sat alongside the console. Both did the same, offering better sound and full motion video, yet the Mega CD did not enhance the graphics.

Full motion video would become a nightmare, as developers used it to slap poorly acted cut-scenes into games, that offered nothing in the way of gameplay, and actually detracted from it. Most developers ignored the higher capacity of the CDs in favour of FMV and as a result, poor games were released, sales dropped and the machine failed. It retailed for £270 in Britain and sold little over 70,000 units.

Despite this, however, Sega tried to keep the Mega Drive alive by releasing another stop-gap in the form of the 32X.

Initially, Sega wanted to engineer a whole new enhanced Mega Drive but decided such a machine would not sell and so created the 32X as a plug-in device instead. Inserted into the cartridge slot, it enhanced the Mega Drive up to 32-bit standard. But it was a mess from start to finish. Problems with supply and compatibility emerged, developers continued to create 2D games despite the add-on's 3D capabilities, and games looked as if they had been hastily put together.

Eventually developers stopped producing games for the enhancement and Sega shot the whole project to pieces by developing the Sega Saturn as a successor to the Mega Drive. It was a bid to take on the PlayStation and Nintendo 64, which were being touted as the market's successors. This time Sega couldn't compete effectively. It had milked its Mega Drive success but failed to get in first for the next-generation battle. Sega's share in the market began to slip and soon dipped to around 30 per cent. Today it is not involved in console production at all… a sad loss to the industry, although one that has proven financially sound.

renewed push in America. Nintendo had *Mario* and Sega – till now – had *Alex Kidd* (later bundled with its Master System). Yet *Sonic* was different; new, invigorating, refreshing. Mario was a plumber with dungarees; Sonic was a blue hedgehog who darted through games at top speed and was damn cool.

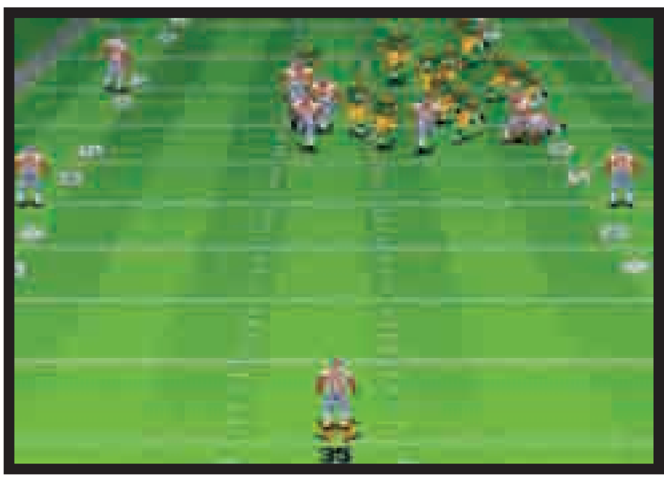
Sonic was a complete hero, saving his fluffy friends from the dastardly Dr Robotnik. But while that sounded soft in principle, in reality it was wonderful, getting Sonic to run, jump high in the sky, spin and go faster than an alcoholic within sniffing distance of a pint of Stella. And when he got a super speed-up bonus, Sonic shot off so rapidly that you could almost taste the dust as you went around collecting gold rings dotted around the landscape.

Now Sega had it all – the younger generation who stared wide-eyed at Sonic's athletic moves and the older gamers who had never seen anything so fluid. Sega's decision to go for more mature gamers was paying off and this was the killer punch. Sonic rightly took his place as Sega's new mascot and by 1992, Sega had taken 55 per cent of the American market.

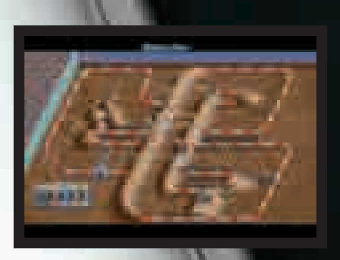
A fresh battle commenced; everything Nintendo did, Sega tried to do better. The raging war meant both companies were constantly innovating. Sega's Nemesis gun was a rival to the SNES's Super Scope lightgun. Sonic was equal to Mario, and gamers were being treated to a golden age of games and products.

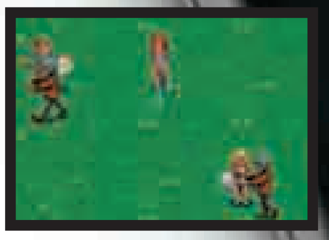
As games advanced, so too did the method of play. The Mega Drive joypad initially had just three buttons and a D-pad. At the time of launch, this was enough, but when more advanced games were released – *Street Fighter 2*, for instance – the joypad showed its age. Gamers wanted more buttons to take

"SEGA'S DECISION TO AIM FOR THE OLDER MARKET WAS REALLY STARTING TO PAY OFF"



▲ Despite what you might think of the franchise now, EA's *Madden* games were incredibly good on the Mega Drive.





advantage of a wider range of moves which were necessary on beat-'em-ups – less so with other game genres. In the end, Sega launched a six-button joypad and allowed people to get to grips with the growing number of one-on-one fight games.

But Sonic was the main weapon of mass destruction aimed squarely at Nintendo. Although the latter was still top dog in Japan, in America and Europe Sega had taken the canine by the balls and achieved what was once thought of as the impossible and toppled its rival. And when the chips were down, Sega wheeled in *Sonic 2* – and the market share in the USA soared to 65 per cent. A good marketing campaign and great game meant *Sonic 2* became the Mega Drive's best selling title.

Just before *Sonic 2* was released, the original *Sonic* was being bundled with the Mega Drive and the press were clamouring for titbits about the sequel. At the Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago in July 1992, Sega only allowed journalists to write about the game and banned them from printing screenshots, because the game wasn't ready. All that managed to do was crank the hype machine up a gear. When Sega was ready to release pictures, a brilliant marketing campaign went into full swing. It was released on the same day worldwide on a day called 'Sonic 2uesday' and copies of the game were snapped up the world over.

In the meantime, more third-party publishers keenly signed up, with significant developers such as Acclaim and Disney. The games were also becoming more diverse – the problem was that Sega didn't have the same quality controls as Nintendo; so among the hundreds of titles released, a sizeable proportion were rubbish. Yet the likes of EA's *Populous* which rubbed along nicely with the arcade conversions, together with the sporting games which became the Mega Drive's forte made it clear that the machine could attract a diverse range of gamers.

As the machine gained popularity, there were price cuts – and at £99 the Mega Drive found itself under the Christmas trees of many a household. In fact, many of the ideas Sega had with the Mega Drive were replicated more recently by Sony with its PlayStation. When the Mega Drive started to look dated, Sega created a new-look version in the same way that Sony reduced the sizes of its two consoles a few years after release.

"A FRESH BATTLE COMMENCED AND EVERYTHING NINTENDO DID, SEGA TRIED TO DO JUST THAT LITTLE BIT BETTER"

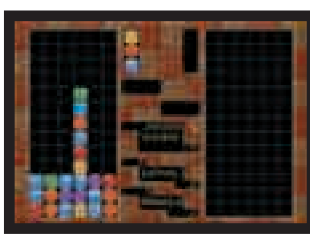
For Sega, this spawned the Mega Drive 2 in 1993. The casing was dramatically altered but retained the same sleek, black look. Inside, everything remained the same but the A/V port was altered so that stereo sound could be outputted to a television, a push button power switch was adopted and the headphone jack was removed.

This gave the console a welcome boost in sales but it was not the first of Sega's tinkerings – in 1990, the Mega Drive was bundled with *World Cup Italia '90* in a great piece of marketing. Various other games were bundled with the console at different points: *Virtua Racing, Sonic 3, Aladdin* and *The Lion King* to name a few, each one playing on the current fad.

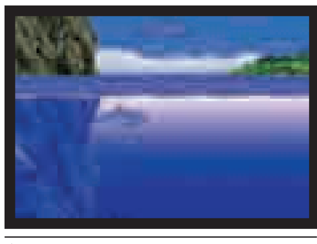
Of course, thanks to Sega's long-standing legacy, the memory of the Mega Drive lives on, as proven by the recent popularity of various plug-and-play versions of certain titles. And with over 30 million Mega Drives sold worldwide, Sega can lay claim to having released one of the most successful consoles of all time. Not an achievement many can boast.



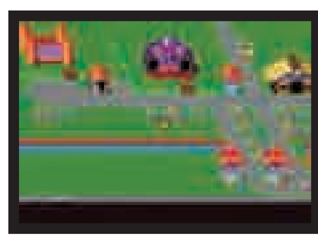
▲ A good licensed game? That's *Alien 3* for you.



▲ *Columns* is certainly a close second to *Tetris*.



▲ For originality, *Ecco The Dolphin* really shone.



▲ Even *Theme Park* worked on Sega's console…

Secret of Mana

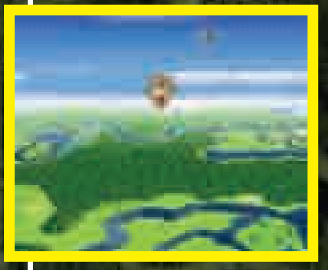
An action RPG that isn't Zelda? Read on…

Release: 1994
Format: SNES
Publisher: Nintendo (UK)
Developer: Square

TAKE ME TO HEAVEN

One standout technical feature of the SNES hardware was its Mode 7 abilities. In layman's terms, Mode 7 let developers rotate and zoom 2D plains in real-time. This allowed for games such as *Pilotwings* to exist and it also made it possible for Square to create a fancy map screen.

Travel in *Secret Of Mana* took on the form of blasting your characters from a cannon. The camera actually shot up into the air as you watched the world disappear below you. Obviously, at the time this was really impressive…

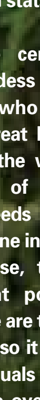


▲ We love you, Flammy! Flying around the map was one of the game's best moments.

While we can look back and cringe at the frame rates of the very first 3D games, it's often the case that the classic 2D titles look as good now as they did back then. Square's groundbreaking action RPG *Secret Of Mana* (*Seiken Densetsu 2* in Japan) is definitely one such game.

Back in the early Nineties, PAL conversions of Japanese RPGs were practically unheard of. While titles such as *Final Fantasy III* and *Chrono Trigger* made it to the US, *Secret Of Mana* was one of the only Square RPGs to make it to Europe, thanks mainly to its action elements. In stark contrast to the publisher's other RPGs – mainly traditional turn-based affairs – Secret Of Mana combined real-time combat with RPG stats and magic attacks.

The game's storyline centred around the Mana Goddess (the essence of the Earth) who had turned herself into the great Mana Tree in order to protect the world from the monsters of the underworld. Her eight seeds were spread around the globe, one in each spiritual palace. Of course, these seeds commanded great power, where there is power there are those that would misuse it, and so it goes that power-hungry individuals stole the seeds in order to take over the world. Sadly for them though, the disruption of the flow of Mana automatically summons the Mana Beast, a creature that will wipe all life



from the planet and start the flow afresh. Damn. Cue your character's job, which is to return the seeds to their rightful place, power up the Mana Sword and send the Mana Beast back from whence it came.

As well as being one of the few action RPGs on the market, *Secret Of Mana* also had another selling point: it allowed for simultaneous multiplayer gaming. By way of the multitap up to three people could each control one of the game's three main characters; while all three were equally as strong as each other in terms of standard combat, they all had their strengths. The warrior – bound by fate – was the true hero, the princess had the ability to cast defensive and curative spells and the mouthy imp-child had the ability to pound the enemy with offensive spells. Weapons could be upgraded by visiting the blacksmith once you'd recovered Weapon Orbs from various bosses; there were eight orbs for each weapon, relating directly to the number of Mana Seeds in the world.

This was fantastic in multiplayer, but most would have been playing it in single-player, so how did that work? The game's menus took the form of expandable ring systems, and several options in the ring allowed you to set up your allies' reactions. A grid allowed you to determine how aggressive they would be, whether they would approach the enemy or stay away, what level they would power their weapons up to and which enemy they would target. When it came to casting spells you did this yourself by jumping into their ring menus and choosing the relevant spell.

The one problem that single-player mode did have – and the only





▲ With the multitap, three people could play at the same time. Oh, how we take these features for granted today…



▲ *Secret Of Mana* was quite a looker in its day – we're not so sure about the puce, though.



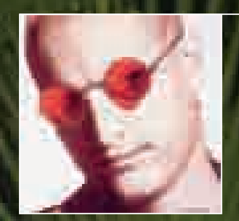


aspect of the game that stands out all these years later – is the characters getting stuck behind scenery. It happened because characters would fall behind for a few seconds and then try to get directly to your position. If there was a wall in the way they'd try to run through it, so you had to backtrack half a screen to retrieve them. It was a pain in the arse at the time and fortunately doesn't tend to happen with today's artificial intelligence.

That little niggle aside, *Secret Of Mana* is still a joy to play even all these years later. The graphics, while looking a little dated, are still pleasing to the eye. The soundtrack is timeless… so much so that we're humming it right now. Since that game, Square has tried to recreate the magic many times. *Secret Of Mana 2, Legend Of Mana* and *Sword Of Mana* all came and went without holding a candle to the original and only now, in 2005, is *Secret Of Mana: Children Of Mana* (DS) threatening to improve upon it.

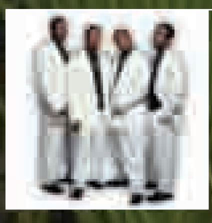
Square Enix obviously realises the potential that the series has. At the moment it looks like the publishing giant is putting more importance behind its *World Of Mana* project than it is the *Final Fantasy VII* project, thereby cementing the fact that *Secret Of Mana* was well ahead of its time. Only now that Wi-Fi and online gaming is becoming a mainstream activity can its multiplayer potential be realised.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1994



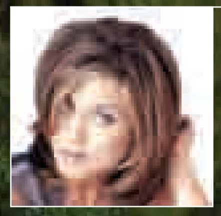
AT THE MOVIES

It was all about unmitigated violence in 1994. Blowing some guy's head off by accident and making crime a celebrated American pastime became the norm with movies such as *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*. True classics, even by today's standards.



ON THE RADIO

It's 1994… so let's give ourselves a name that has a number in the title. Boyz II Men, that sounds good. How about All-4-One? Awesome. We swear, by the moon and the stars in the sky, that this will never be allowed to happen in the music industry ever again.



ON THE BOX

It's hard to imagine a time without Joey, Chandler, Ross, Monica, Phoebe and Rachel, but 1994 is the year when the series first debuted. It was also the year that tens of thousands of women rushed into their local hair salons demanding 'The Rachel.'



ON THE DESKTOP

It was a sad day for young gamers when in 1994, Commodore – the might behind the C64 and Amiga – filed for bankruptcy, signaling the end of an era. A year later, the average physical fitness for teenagers in the UK had risen by 230 per cent. That's a fact.

Why Don't Remake...

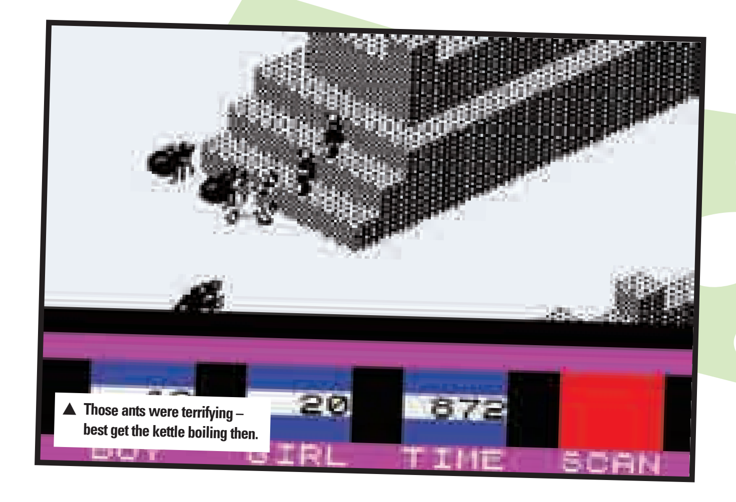
3D ANT ATTACK

A FORGOTTEN CLASSIC THAT TOOK THE CONCEPT OF 3D GAMING TO NEW HEIGHTS

Release: **1983**
Format: **Spectrum (original), C64**
Publisher: **Quicksilva**
Developer: **Sandy White**

In the early Eighties, when videogaming was still establishing itself as a worthy pastime here in the UK, two significant games found their way into our homes and hearts. Both were 3D, both were for Sinclair machines and both remain revered classics. And while it could be argued that *3D Monster Maze* has since evolved, *3D Ant Attack* has been left largely untouched.

3D Ant Attack introduced the player to some novel twists. Firstly, on starting the game you could choose whether you wanted to play the role of the boy or the girl, and secondly you could pick the angle at which the game was played; it was one of the first to use a solid isometric 3D environment. Armed with a limited amount of grenades and playing against the clock, you were charged with entering Antescher, a deadly city populated with giant ants, and delivering the opposite sex (to that which you had chosen) to safety outside the city walls. To help you along the way, you could change the view of play to one of four points which proved an essential part of the game allowing you to see around corners and behind walls.



▲ Those ants were terrifying – best get the kettle boiling then.

They



▲ Ignore the visuals – it's the ingenuity that counts.

At first, the game eased you in, with the initial rescue being quite easy, but the game wasn't over until ten hapless binary beings had been liberated successfully. As you progressed, the giant human-eating ants became more and more intelligent, tracking you down quickly. And in the heat of the moment, it was always possible to accidentally kill the very mortal that you were trying to rescue, by accidentally hurling a grenade in his or her general direction. When your arsenal ran out, it was still possible to overcome foes by jumping on their heads to paralyse them.

Certainly, the game was a landmark in its time and we'd suggest that a remake of this seminal game is one that will transfer well to contemporary platforms. The game mechanic, already fast and playable with a nice learning curve, would form its foundations and with the graphical horsepower available today, it would have the added advantage to view the playfield from any angle 360 degrees around the player, zoom in or out at will and have more than the black and white building blocks of the original. Map designers should be included as well as new cities to explore, and the music should be dramatic and ominous, just like the game. But we wouldn't be happy unless an Easter Egg was included that allows you to play the glorious original in it's truest form. Because it's still excellent.



▼ A girl saving a man? It's unheard of…





Keep On





Runnin'

ONE SERIES, MANY GAMES AND YET THE ORIGINAL STILL STANDS AS THE PINNACLE OF YU SUZUKI'S OUTRUN BRAND. ROBERT MELLOR DIVES INTO THE HISTORY OF SEGA'S MOST BELOVED FRANCHISES...

Retro Feature

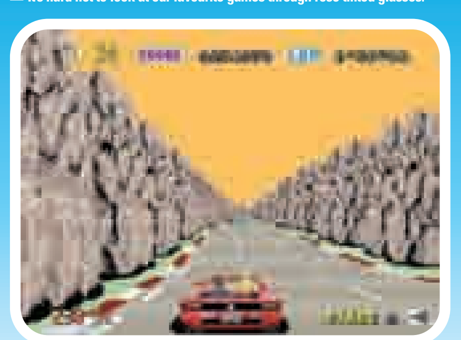
Release: 1986
Format: Arcade
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-House

For those who remember it back in the glory days of the Eighties arcade, *OutRun* remains one of the greatest racing games ever produced. In 1986, Japanese arcade giant Sega unleashed a machine on the gaming community that featured mouth-watering visuals, uncannily realistic play, a breathtaking soundtrack and an unprecedented level of presentation. *OutRun* was years ahead of its time and advanced the gaming industry in leaps and bounds thanks to its creator Yu Suzuki and the Sega AM2 team.

Back in the early to mid Eighties, racing games were becoming a prominent feature in arcades worldwide. The likes of *Pole Position* and *Spy Hunter* had proved immensely popular genre classics and were groundbreaking games in their own right. They were well designed, fun to play and won many an accolade from critics and gamers alike. But one thing these games and their ilk hadn't quite nailed down yet was the truly realistic feel of cruising along the highway at breakneck speed. 1983's *Spy Hunter* from Bally Midway was a game that utilised the tried and tested top-down perspective, so it was never going to revolutionise realistic simulators. Atari's *Pole Position* series (1982-1983), meanwhile, was a little more daring with its 'view-from-behind-the-car' vantage point, giving the player a kind of simulated 3D third-person perspective, while also setting the standard for player controls with a steering wheel, gear shifter and two foot pedals. Additionally, these games also employed the concept of a variety of cabinets to house the games in, offering both stand-up and sit-in (albeit stationary) environmental variants. But still something was lacking. They were enjoyable enough to play but drivers didn't really get that feeling of high-octane speed, tight bends and adrenalin-charged realism. The in-game tracks were completely flat and only swerved from left to right, making for somewhat predictable and repetitive gameplay, while the graphics and sound were acceptable for their time but



▲ It's hard not to look at our favourite games through rose tinted glasses.

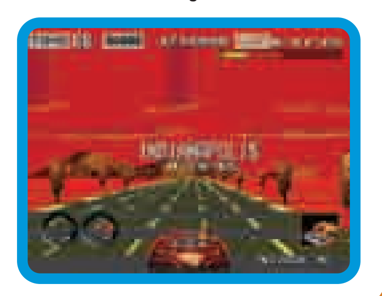




TURBO OUTRUN

Sega's official sequel to OutRun kicks things up a notch...

The first arcade sequel to *OutRun* came in the form of this 1989 turbo-charged race across the USA that saw the Testarossa of the original make way for the flame-spitting chassis of the Ferrari F40. Originally available from Sega in either a unique cabinet or a conversion kit for the original *OutRun* coin-op, the gorgeous graphics and sound were back in full force, along with some new features such as the option to enhance the car's performance with various add-ons. The game bore a slightly more linear approach in its style but shook things up with rivals to beat to the next checkpoint, cop cars to evade and weather effects that altered playing dynamics accordingly. Many of the home conversions were once again handled by US Gold back in late 1989, who made a better attempt at the sequel than they did at the original (the C64 version is considered a genuine classic).



"GAMERS COULDN'T HELP BUT BE DRAWN TO OUTRUN'S STUNNING GRAPHICS, REALISM AND SPEED"

hardly groundbreaking. Then *OutRun* came along, and it was all that and more.

SEGA LEADS THE PACK

With proven masterpieces like Space Harrier and Hang-On (both from 1985) already behind them, Sega's AM2 team pushed the technology of the time to the limit to create *OutRun*, with a Motorola Dual 68000 set-up forming the basis of the hardware – giving the game unprecedented power, speed and visuals. A Z80 unit was fitted as the sound CPU with a sound chip set-up comprising a YM2151 and Custom PCM chip. The title had a video resolution of 320 x 224 yielding 4,128 colours, while the features of the hardware allowed 128 sprites on screen at any given time, two tile layers, a text layer, a sprite layer with a hardware zooming capability, translucent shadows and one road layer with the ability to draw upto two road layers at any one time. In layman's terms, this basically meant a game the likes of which had never been seen before.

The first immediately noticeable aspect of *OutRun* was the visuals. Even if the local arcade owner had chosen to turn off the sound in the Attract mode, gamers couldn't help but be drawn to the stunning graphics, the realism of the game and the sheer speed at which it ran – not to mention the fact that it featured one of the most instantly recognisable super-cars of the decade. The title was a truly unique entity that blended a believable racing simulator with arcade action and thrills. It featured tight corners, annoying trucks and cars that seemed to stop at nothing to prevent players reaching their goal. It also moved at a break-neck speed that left you wondering how you'd ever make it to that next checkpoint without crashing into the absolutely stunning scenery. To this day, Coconut Beach (the starting point) is one of the most visually awesome stages a racing game has ever produced: the palm trees, the blue sky littered with fluffy clouds, the sun-drenched beach complete with ocean and tourists that pass on the way – all of it was a wonderful sight to behold as the magnificent Ferrari Testarossa glided effortlessly through it. Subsequent stages were equally picturesque, but arguably most impressive from a visual perspective was the way the scenery would seamlessly morph from one setting to the next as the car crossed over through the courses – a truly wondrous effect that yet again demonstrated how far ahead of its competitors Sega really was.

SELECTIVE DRIVING

Aside from the unrivalled eye-candy, *OutRun* offered what was then unmatched choice for a racing game, going so far as to let players choose their own route in an ingenious manner: at the end of each stage the bright red sports car would zoom past a road sign that indicated a fork in the track just ahead. Here players could choose to turn either left or right, both of which would take them to the checkpoint and a different, equally sumptuous scenario depending on which

BATTLE OUTRUN

The sequels mount up with Battle OutRun on the Master System…

This was one of a couple of spin-off sequels released on Sega's 8-bit Master System console. Produced in 1989, it proved a disappointing blend of *Chase HQ* and *Spy Hunter* where the objective was to hunt down the bad guy and ram his car off the road for a cash bonus, after which a new mission objective would be issued, setting the player off on the same task again. Decent graphics couldn't make up for the boring tracks and weak score which, when added to gameplay that quickly became repetitive, resulted in a rather lacklustre instalment.



OUTRUN 3D

Another SMS spin-off from Sega in 1989

This was far more enjoyable than *Battle OutRun*, thanks to the 3D gimmick that bundled the cartridges with an obligatory pair of funny-coloured glasses. Starting in a beach scenario, the road forks took players to diverse locations not seen before in *OutRun* titles – most interestingly an underground tunnel. There were four tunes to choose from, with *Magical Sound Shower* returning and being joined by three new compositions: *Midnight Highway*, *Colour Ocean* and *Shining Wind*. Suitable graphics and gameplay made this release a worthwhile one, if not a classic.



direction had been opted for. Five stages had to be traversed from a total of 15 different courses that yielded five separate ending sequences and a mind-boggling number of routes that would ultimately result in the game's completion.

But the in-game choices didn't stop there, *OutRun* provided the player with the option of actually choosing their own music to drive to. Upon inserting a credit, they'd be greeted with a screen depicting a hand cycling through the stations on the in-car radio. Here punters could choose one of three different tunes by turning the steering wheel and then pressing Start once the selection had been made, featuring the aptly named compositions *Splash Wave*, *Magical Sound Shower* and *Passing Breeze*. Each of these tracks were masterful pieces and the music of *OutRun* became a legend in its own right, with many remixes and arranged versions appearing to this day.

Perhaps the most pioneering aspect of *OutRun* however, was the undulating road and scenery, which was a unique feature at the time. In other racing games of the era the road only deviated from left to right, but thanks to Yu Suzuki and his incredible team at Sega the track in *OutRun* actually went up and

"IT WAS THE SCALING BACKDROPS THAT REALLY SET OUTRUN APART FROM ITS COMPETITORS"

down, resulting in some particularly heart-stopping effects as the majestic Ferrari plummeted down steep drops in one stage and climbed hills with the view of the horizon completely obscured in others. Through Sega's groundbreaking hardware, the scenery itself was also used to create the illusion of speed with roadside objects and other vehicles on the path gradually becoming larger and zooming towards players in real time until they passed them. Most contemporary games only managed to simulate acceleration and speed with a tiled road, and while Sega did use this method for *OutRun*, it was the scaling backdrops that really made the difference and set it apart from its competitors.

The actual arcade cabinet itself came in four basic versions: a stand-up mini with a start button, standard-fitted force-feedback steering wheel and gear stick below the screen, along with brake and acceleration pedals at the base. The second variant was a full-size version of the mini stand-up cabinet with the same set-up as before. Next up in the chain was the sit-down model that allowed players to sit down in front of the screen while playing the game, as opposed to standing up as seen on the budget models. And finally, there was the deluxe rolling cabinet, essentially a jazzed up version of the sit-in model that actually moved as you played creating an even greater sense of realism.

COMING HOME

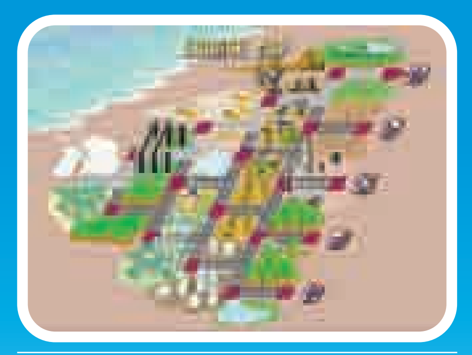
Following its blistering success in arcades, *OutRun* became the most eagerly anticipated title to make it to home platforms. UK software giant US Gold snapped up the publishing rights and announced to the world that the game would receive a release in time for

OUTRUN EUROPA

The sequel that nearly didn't make it...

Originally entitled 'OutRun Europe', this was put into production by US Gold as an unofficial follow-up after the success of its conversions of the original. The project was ultimately shelved when the software house decided to port *Turbo OutRun* instead. This unfinished version of 'OutRun Europe' languished in development stasis for two years until it was revamped and released as *OutRun Europa* on all major home computer formats. The result was decidedly uneven. For a start, players raced vehicles through Europe across land, air and sea, which bolstered variety but took away the simple appeal of the original. Add another *Chase HQ* action element and the experience just didn't feel like *OutRun*. Pleasant graphics helped, as did the diverse selection of locations, but overall this couldn't match up to the original.

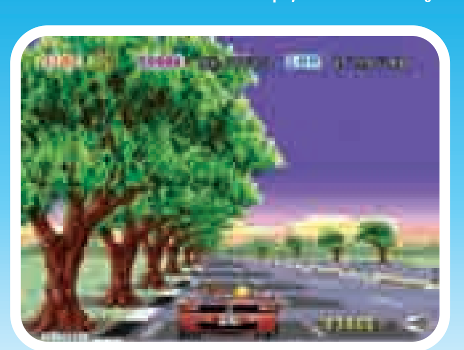




▲ The brilliant 'fork in the road' feature made play all the more interesting.



▲ The tunes you could select became as well known as the game itself.

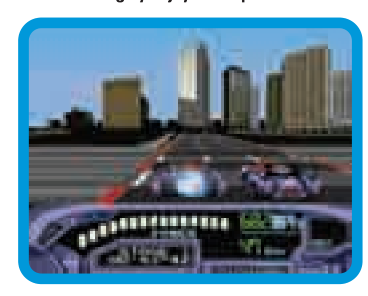




OUTRUN 2019

And the updates just keep coming...

This futuristic take on the *OutRun* saga was released on the Sega Mega Drive in 1993. Featuring out-of-this-world landscapes rendered in a suitably tech-noir style, gameplay was enhanced thanks to the fact that the player's car came super charged, resulting in a sudden dramatic boost of acceleration once a certain speed was reached. Nice presentation and a good selection of atmospheric tunes rounded out the package producing a game that, although not truly *OutRun* in feel, delivered a highly enjoyable experience.



"OUTRUN BECAME THE MOST EAGERLY ANTICIPATED TITLE TO MAKE IT TO HOME PLATFORMS"

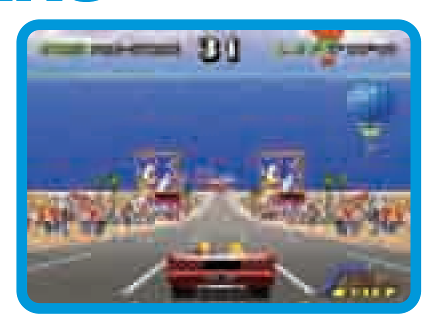
Christmas 1987 with all the major formats covered, from the most popular 8-bit machines to the recently released Atari ST, with PC and ultimately Amiga versions to follow. An immense buzz surrounded the imminent release, fuelled as a result of US Gold starting a massive advertising campaign with beautiful full-page spreads in publications declaring, "The machine becomes a home computer reality on 10 December." Magazines worked themselves into a fever trying to get the latest information about the game, with many titles running special features on *OutRun's* development and what the home versions would have in store. Meanwhile, no expense would be spared on packaging and presentation, with detailed box art, an insightful instruction manual and even the arcade soundtrack bundled with the software on a bonus tape. The stage was well and truly set for a gaming masterpiece.

Sadly, translations for the home micros were largely a disappointment, producing a laborious Spectrum port saddled with crippling tape multi-load, a gaudy and unplayable Amstrad release and an annoyingly weak Amiga version that turned out to be little more than a by-the-numbers Atari ST conversion complete with an embarrassingly self-indulgent intro screen. The version for the Commodore 64 however, proved a pleasant surprise and turned out to be a very faithful translation with fast play, suitable graphics, excellent sound and a superbly designed loading system that offered five different courses to choose from (albeit at the expense of the road-fork feature).

OUTRUNNERS

The first in the OutRun series to include a multiplayer option...

Sega released the third arcade-based *OutRun* game on its System 32 hardware in 1993 and, despite its relative obscurity, it turned out to be a dramatic success with fans of the original. Presentation was excellent with lots of speech, gorgeous and detailed scaling graphics, a choice of cars to race in, several tunes that could actually be cycled through mid game and the customary ability to choose a variety of routes. The most notable addition to the game however, turned out to be the simultaneous multiplayer option – a first for the *OutRun* series – that offered the ability for 2-8 players to compete via machine link-ups. As with most *OutRun* arcade titles,



this release provided a tough challenge and required a lot of perseverance to see through to completion but was well worth the effort. A satisfying port for the Sega Mega Drive was released in 1994.

Console versions naturally followed, with Sega handling many of these itself, delivering an excellent Mega Drive rendition in 1991 and an arcade-perfect translation for the Sega Saturn in the mid-Nineties. The PC Engine received an impressive version of its own in 1990, while Tiger Electronics even took it upon itself to turn in LCD handheld incarnations in the early Nineties. The final appearance of the game to date came on the Dreamcast as part of Yu Suzuki's acclaimed *Shenmue* series, alongside other Sega classics that could be enjoyed in a virtual arcade found within the oriental RPG.

Despite this rather haphazard migration from arcade to home however, *OutRun* in its original unadulterated arcade format was (and for many still is) the quintessential racing game; a dynamic mix of handling, playability, effects, style, visuals and sounds that have stood the test of time.



Share your views about old-school gaming

Retro Contact

First Contact

If you're into retro gaming and you've got something to share with the world, why not write to us at:
games™ Retro, Highbury Entertainment, Paragon House, St Peters Road, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH1 2JS Or you can email: gamestm@paragon.co.uk

I CAN'T GET NO SLEEP

Dear games™,

I just read the letter from Kevin (issue 39) and his search for *40 Winks* which he thought was an N64 game. I remembered my niece playing this on the PSone years ago. Coincidentally, on the preceding page in The Ultimate Collection section there's a pile of PSone games and on the furthest left column, second from the top you'll actually see *40 Winks*. Perhaps it was never released by Eurocom (who appears to be the publisher) when it knew the PSone would sell more copies. Keep up the good work.

Tony Bloomfield

Good game spotting there – yes, *40 Winks* was, indeed, released on the original PlayStation and was a fun if undemanding game aimed squarely at the rugrats. Incidentally, a quick gander at eBay shows that *40 Winks* can easily be picked up for just a couple of quid. Sounds like a bargain to us and as we write this there are eight copies of it on offer so you shouldn't have too much trouble getting your hands on one.



See? It might not have ever come out, but the N64 packaging exists…

EBAY ESSENTIALS

Dear games™,

I received my paltry pay packet a week ago. Thanks to you, I've already spent more than I can actually afford on what my other half would consider 'non-essential items'. Let me explain, I was thumbing through your magazine (as I do every month), reading through the retro section and trying to decide on my top five games of old. I became overwhelmed with this delicious comforting warmth, something I haven't felt in a long time. As a result I have now spent close to £50 on eBay. So far, I've purchased a C64 and trawled for the games I played in my youth.

I blame my parents for forcing me to sell my beloved C64 over 20 years ago. Apparently if I wanted an Atari ST the C64 had to go – I didn't need two computers. The Atari ST then had to go if I wanted an Amiga. Thankfully as I grew older I grew wiser and I still have my Amiga. I open the cupboard and stare at it no and again.

However, you must take some responsibility for my situation. Your insistence that I replay my top five retro games led to what can only be described as a bidding frenzy on eBay. I had my limit, I knew what I was prepared to pay for that gorgeous-looking C64, but naturally that all went out of the window the moment I was outbid, as it was going to be mine at all costs… and mine it was. Thanks a bunch,

Neil

'Non-essential'? It sounds to us like your Commodore 64 was exactly what you needed to resurrect your love of gaming. There is one lesson to be learned here, though, and it's one that we encounter time and again, don't sell your old console as soon as you buy the latest model. Then again, because of the regretted actions of your youth, you did get to enjoy the thrill of that last-minute winning bid as the eBay timer ticked down to zero minutes…



Your first Commodore – once you own one, you'll never part with it.

NAME THAT GAME

Dear games™,

I'm a fairly new reader of your fine mag and I adore older games, I'm writing to ask if you can help me identify an old arcade game that I played once when I was about nine in either 1987 or 1988. It came in a sit-in cabinet just like the one that Atari's *Star Wars* coin-op came in.



Glenn's game isn't *Powerdrome* – that only came out on home formats.









Run, Mr Pac-Man, run – as fast as your… er, curved bottom will allow.

I seem to remember controlling a ship, which, as far as I can recall, resembled something like the tomcat in *Afterburner* – come to think of it the viewpoint was similar too (behind the ship) as the game was not top down or sideways scrolling. Other than that, all I can remember is that it was fast-paced – one moment the ship would be screaming along a planet surface with what looked like an Egyptian theme running in the background and the next it would be travelling through a colourful tunnel (possibly a wormhole).

I apologise that all this is a bit vague, but it plagues me to this day that I never caught its name, I don't know if it was a new game at the time; it may even be a really obscure/rare title, but I'd be eternally grateful if you could put me out of my misery…

Glenn Barkell

Gah… damn you, Glenn. We're pretty sure we know what game you're talking about – we can see it in our heads and everything. We're sure it was by Atari, but the name's just not coming… so we're going to throw this perplaxing little question over to the reliable readers of games™ Anybody have the answer to Glenn's query? Anybody?

STAR LETTER

Dear games™,

You know what I think is wrong with the cult of retro gaming? Credibility. The vocabulary of most retro writings is that of nostalgia. An important aspect, yes, but it also makes retro fans look like misty-eyed old farts that can't let go of the past.

Harking back isolates newer gamers and kids who've only ever known *GTA* and its flabby, open-ended 3D-'em-up ilk. Retro games show these people how technical limitations motivated developers to innovate, laying the foundations for today's titles, and how elegant the 2D forms are compared to today's trendy non-linearity, and they'll be more likely to appreciate good new games than settle for the latest generic 3D actioner.

History lesson aside, there are a lot of superb retro games that have never been bettered for playability – *Super Mario Bros.*, *Robotron* or *Elite* – but while retro still has overtones of 'when all this were fields', re-discovering them will remain as unattractive as shoulder-pads, shell-suits and mullets.

Like everything else, retro games will pass in and out of fashion. The attitude was always a bit 'naff' though – chuck it out with your 8-track. It's time to move on.

Matthew Dunne

Fair point – not all games from the past are classics, but you must realise why it may seem that retro writings are mainly positive – it's a matter of space. If there is a two-page spread spare, wouldn't you rather we waxed lyrical about a true classic than yapped on about how rubbish some old game was? Most retro fans don't have their heads in the sand; it's just that we appreciate the history and progression of our favourite hobby, and if getting excited about an original dedicated Pac-Man machine is wrong, then we really don't want to be right at all.

ORIGINAL AND BEST?

Dear games™,

It seems that recently there have been an impressive number of retro collections released both for home machines and handhelds. While this is obviously a good thing for those of us who remember, I always wonder why they often insist on including updated versions too. Take the *Namco Museum* PSP collection for example; it contains some of my favourite games ever made, but I have no desire to play a new version of *Pac-Man* when I have the original right there. Do you think that these collections actually sell any more copies because of these updates or are they just included so that companies can't be accused of just re-releasing titles that many already own?

James Cash

Anyone not interested in old games is not likely to change their mind because the titles are suddenly transformed into 3D. The way to look at it is that essentially you're getting something for free – *Namco Museum* features enough classic games to keep the most picky retro fan happy, so if you're not interested in the new 'Arrangement' versions, it's not that big a deal. Although we recommend *Pac-Man Arrangement* if you're open to a slightly different take on the classic we all love.









It might be easy to play retro games through emulation, but there's nothing quite like owning the original system – that musty smell of ancient electronics can never really be replicated with a PC. Of course, there's always a price to pay and unscrupulous dealers are out to make a quick buck, but you really don't have to pay through the nose if you look in the right places. Charity shops, car boot sales and eBay are all good places to start, but before you do, use our guide to see how much you should be paying…

3DO

Panasonic 3DO	£60
Goldstar 3DO	£50-60

ACORN COMPUTERS

BBC Micro	£50
Acorn Electron	£40

AMSTRAD

Amstrad CPC 464	£10-25
Amstrad CPC 664	£20-25
Amstrad CPC 6128	£25
Amstrad GX4000	£15-30



ATARI

Atari VCS 2600	£30 (wooden models tend to cost more)
Atari ST	£40 (with software)
Atari Lynx	£15
Atari Jaguar	£20-30

COMMODORE

Commodore Vic 20	£15-20
Commodore 64	£25-35 (varies according to model)
Commodore Amiga	£35-40 (varies according to model)
Commodore CDTV	£50-60
C64GS	£50 (becoming more sought-after)
Commodore CD32	£35

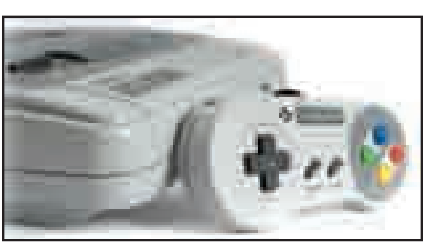


MISC

GCE Vectrex (General Consumer Electronics)	£70-250
MB Vectrex (Milton Bradley)	£175-200
JAMMA compatible cabinets	£100-350 (depending on model)
Supergun	£150-200 (varies according to model)

NEC

PC Engine	£40-100
Turbo Grafx-16	£50-60
Turbo Duo	£115-220
PC Engine GT	£80-180
Super Grafx	£200-300



NINTENDO

Game & Watch	£10-200 (depending on title)
Nintendo Entertainment System	£15-20
Game Boy/Game Boy Pocket	£10
Game Boy Color	£15
Super Nintendo	£20-45
Virtual Boy	£75-100
Nintendo 64	£20-25

SEGA

Master System	£20-30
Master System II	£10-25
Mega Drive	£5-20
Mega Drive II	£10-25
Game Gear	£10-25
Mega CD	£40-60
Sega 32X	£30
Sega Nomad	£75-150
Saturn	£15-35 (depending on model)
Dreamcast	£20-200 (depending on model)

SINCLAIR

Sinclair ZX-81	£40
ZX Spectrum 48K	£40-50
ZX Spectrum +	£30
ZX Spectrum 128K	£40
ZX Spectrum +2	£35
ZX Spectrum +3	£40

SNK

Neo-Geo MVS Single Slot (arcade system)	£70 (prices for multi-slots are higher)
Neo-Geo AES (home system)	£175-225
Neo-Geo CD	£125-175
Neo-Geo CDZ	£150-175
Neo-Geo Pocket Color	£30-50

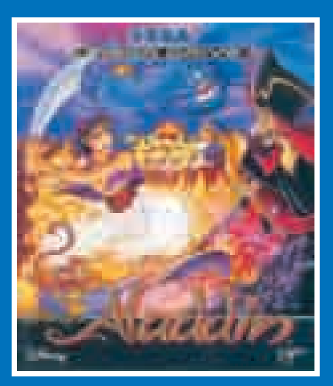


Right, you've just picked up a second-hand console and are looking for some classics to play on it. The only problem is that you don't know what to go for. Hopefully we can help. Every month we will print the current range of prices for a range of classic games for a particular system. Of course, this is subject to change so don't be surprised if you manage to get one for less (or, unfortunately, more). This issue we bring you an evocative collection of Mega Drive titles to tempt you…

Aladdin

Developer: Disney Interactive
Estimated Price: £3-8

It's not often that a cartoon tie-in hits people's 'Best Of' lists, but *Aladdin* is an exception. Graphically stunning for its time, the character animation and backgrounds were superbly detailed. And crucially for a Disney title, it featured the catchy songs from the big screen version. The film's humour is intact and the flying carpet sequences were a thrilling highlight – but be warned, the difficulty level rises sharply when you hit the final boss…



Crue Ball

Developer : NuFX Inc
Estimated Price: £5-10

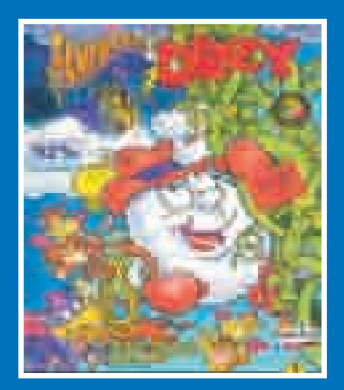
As the title cunningly suggests, this is pinball featuring Mötley Crüe's mascot Alister Fiend as he attempts to spread the power of rock around the world. As well as featuring Crüe-related imagery and logo elements, it also includes a trio of Mötley Crüe's hits – *Live Wire, Home Sweet Home* and *Dr Feelgood* – though if you don't want computerised bleepy versions of the classics, we'd suggest turning the sound down and blasting *Girls Girls Girls*.



Fantastic Dizzy

Developer: Codemasters
Estimated Price: £10-20

Better known for his appearances on the Spectrum, Dizzy made the leap to the Mega Drive with *Fantastic Dizzy*. Classic platform fare – Dizzy's girlfriend has been kidnapped and taken to the castle lair of the evil Zaks. Our yolking hero must save the girl and the day by visiting a number of colourful locations. *Fantastic Dizzy* offers puzzle features and arcade mini-games – this comes with all the charm of the older home computer version.



Flashback

Developer: Delphine
Estimated Price: £5-15

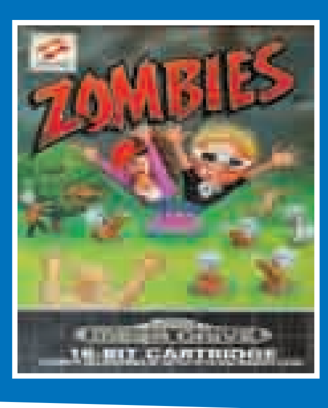
Flashback was one of the most original games of its generation and still looks more like an animated movie than a traditional game. It tells the story of a man who wakes with no idea who he is, where he is or how he got there; only by questioning those he meets can he discover the truth. *Flashback* featured some of the Mega Drive's greatest cinematic sequences, and playing it today, we're astounded that no one has decided to remake it.



Zombies

Developer: LucasArts
Estimated Price: £5-8

The story is simple – basically all hell is breaking loose and you must battle zombies, vampires, mummies and even giant ants as they attempt to take over the neighbourhood. Using a variety of quirky weaponry, you must battle your way through 55 levels of science fiction fun. The game is great in single-player but really comes into its own with the two-player mode where you team up to save the world.



Alex Kidd In The Enchanted Castle

Developer: Sega
Estimated Price: £5-8

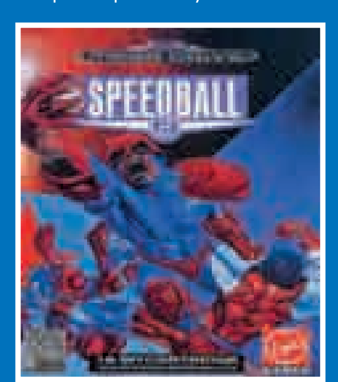
One of Sega's biggest Master System franchises, with many later models coming with a *Kidd* adventure built in. In *The Enchanted Castle* our hero goes in search of his missing father, eventually arriving at the castle. One of Sega's more colourful characters, Kidd has never suffered the overkill that (arguably) Mario has been subjected to and this is still fun, if simplistic.



Speed Ball 2

Developer: Bitmap Brothers
Estimated Price: Price: £3-5

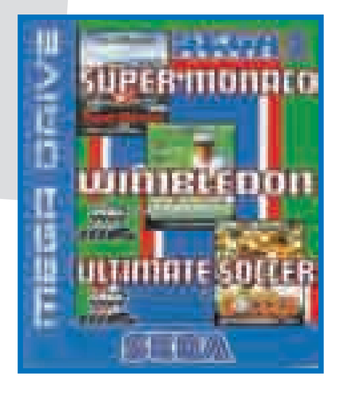
Still one of the most lauded sports titles of all time, *Speed Ball 2* is the pinnacle of futuristic sports action. Unlike *Madden* where you need to learn loads of rules, here you just focus on slamming a steel ball into the opponent's goal. Leading off a team looking to make a name for itself, you use brute force to take out opponents by any means necessary. Brilliant and cheap as chips on eBay. Get. Now.

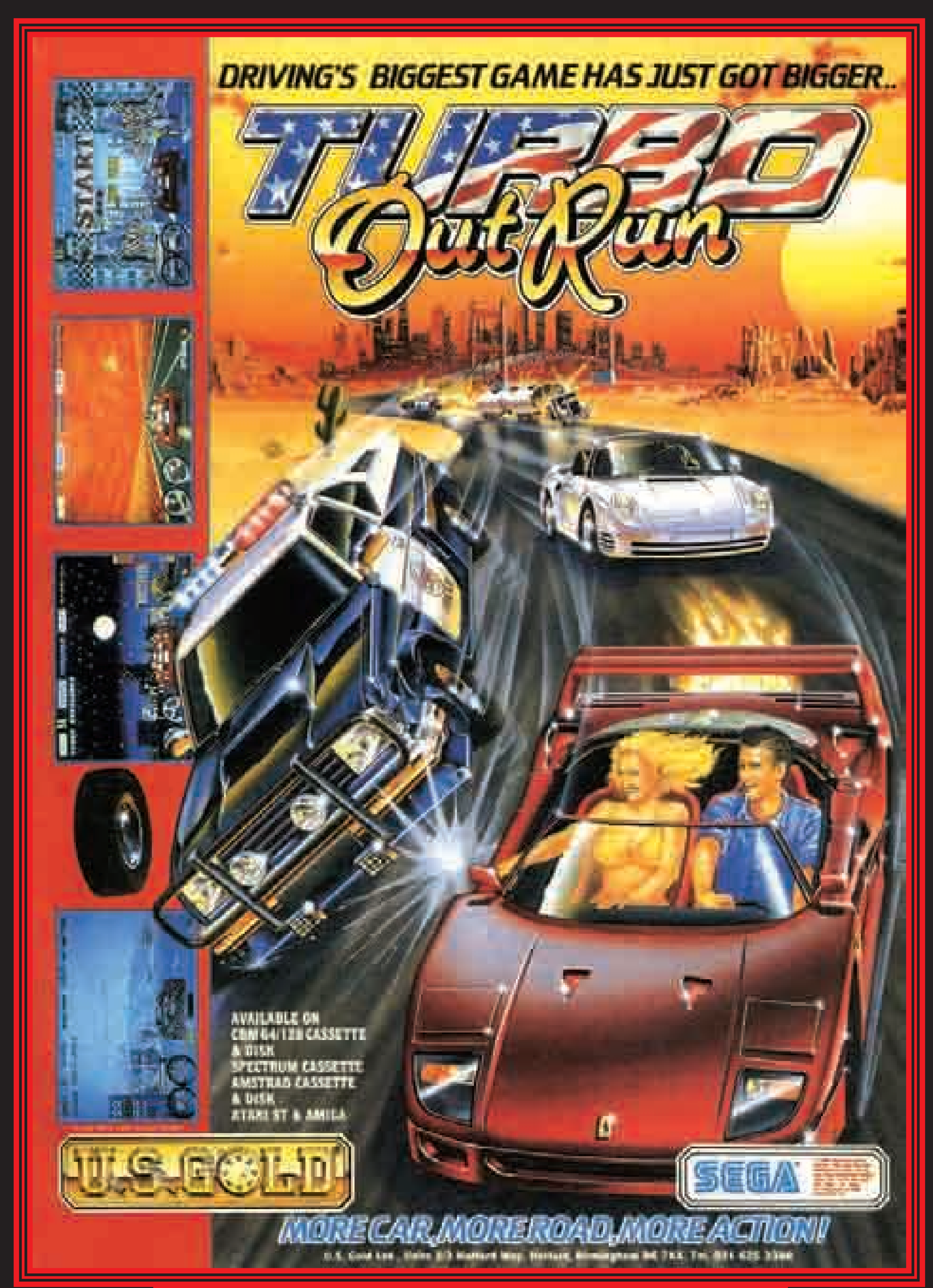


Sega Sports 1

Developer: Sega
Estimated Price: £6-10

We've included this not because it's the best example of the genre, but just to show that there was a time when EA didn't monopolise the sports genre and that other companies also had big monetary success. Sega scored big by snagging the *Wimbledon* licence, and *Super Monaco* was a great racing game too. *Ultimate Soccer* wasn't so impressive but did allow four players to play, a rarity at the time.





TURBO OUTRUN (Various) Sega, 1987 – Original UK Advert


eMag

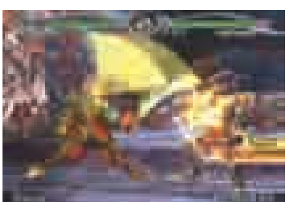
ESSENTIALS

TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-



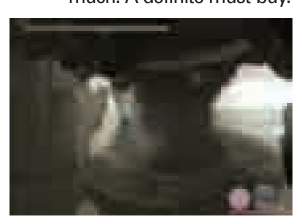
SOUL CALIBUR III

So, let's put this into perspective. It's practically the same game, with virtually the same characters and almost identical visuals… so how is it better than the last one in every way? We can't put our finger on it. Still, that doesn't stop us enjoying it to the hilt.



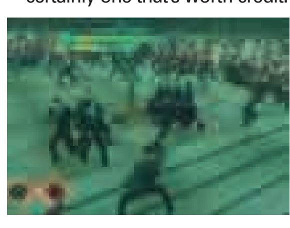
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Fighting 16 consecutive boss battles one after another doesn't sound like the most stimulating game ever, and yet *Shadow Of The Colossus* is magnificent. The beauty, the elegance… it's all too much. A definite must-buy.



THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO

Yes, yes… we're as surprised as you are, given the atrocity that was *Enter The Matrix*. But there's no denying that Shiny has done a good job with *Path Of Neo* – not an amazing job, granted, but certainly one that's worth credit.





PLAYSTATION2

Manufacturer Sony
UK Launch Date 24 November 2000
Media 4.75-inch DVD Disc
Current Price £104.99

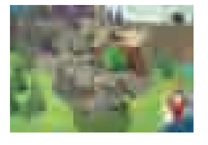
The oldest of the next-generation consoles, having had well over a year's head start over both the GameCube and Xbox. Thanks to Sony's reputation, though, it's still the most popular console around – a trend that will no doubt continue now that the remodelled, one-quarter-size PStwo is available in both traditional black and 'special' silver.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE PLAYSTATION2 GAMES

Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Amplitude	Sony	Harmonix	Music games have never needed as much skill as this
Beyond Good & Evil	Ubisoft	In-House	A fine example of adventuring; well worth the wait
Devil May Cry 3	Capcom	In-House	Hard as nails but certainly the highlight of the series
Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness	Atlus	Nippon Ichi	Like your RPGs practically endless? Then this is for you
God Of War	Sony	In-House	Sony's answer to *Devil May Cry* is a godly delight
Gran Turismo 4	Sony	Polyphony Digital	Worth the wait, thankfully – even without the online mode
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	Bigger, badder, better – a great *GTA* experience
Gitaroo Man	THQ	Koei	The genuine thing of rhythm-action beauty
Ico	SCEE	In-House	Possibly the most beautiful game ever made
Makai Kingdom	Koei	Nippon Ichi	Another example of why Nippon Ichi rules the RPG world
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	Konami	In-House	Flawed genius, but genius nevertheless
Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time	Ubisoft	In-House	The original still reigns for style and substance
Pro Evolution Soccer 5	Konami	In-House	The best football game around? Yes – again
Rez	Sega	UGA	Deceptively simple – draws you in before you know it
Shadow Of The Colossus IMPORT	Sony	In-House	So simple and yet such an absorbingly beautiful game
Soul Calibur III	Sony	Namco	Polishes the franchise's sword until it gleams
SSX On Tour	Electronic Arts	EA Sports BIG	A great refinement that enhances the series further
Tony Hawk's Underground 2	Activision	Neversoft	Better? Again? How does Neversoft keep doing it?
Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution	Sega	In-House	By far the deepest 3D fighting game around today
We Love Katamari IMPORT	Namco	In-House	Just as quirky as the original, which makes it brilliant

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

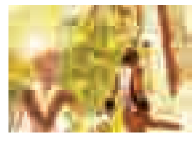
We Love Katamari
Hardly improved over its predecessor and yet easily one of the most fun games we've played in a long time.



SSX On Tour
Another refinement from EA Sports BIG, but one that expands the world of sliding over snow immensely.



Ico
Handily being re-released early next year when *Shadow Of The Colossus* arrives – if you haven't played it, do so. Now.



God Of War
Supposedly, the next-gen sequel is already being worked on, but we're still loving the original game.



MGS3: Snake Eater
Damn you, Snake – damn you and your overly stealthy friends. If you weren't such fun, we'd hate you forever.









EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE



XBOX

Manufacturer Microsoft
UK Launch Date
13 March 2002
Media
4.75-inch DVD Disc
Current Price £99.99

Despite a slow start, the Xbox has swiftly become one of the major players in today's console market. Suggestions that the machine is only 'a PC in a box' are founded, although the Xbox is far more accessible to gamers than most PCs. Despite the upcoming Xbox 360, Microsoft has pledged to support the console until at least 2007.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE XBOX GAMES

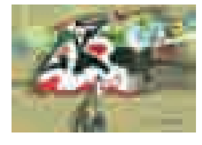
Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	Electronic Arts	DICE	Online and off, this is the definitive console shooter
Burnout Revenge	EA Games	Criterion Studios	Another high-speed smash of a success for Criterion
Chronicles Of Riddick: Butcher Bay	Vivendi Universal	Starbreeze Studios	A fine example of great gameplay and top-notch graphics
Def Jam: Fight For New York	Electronic Arts	Aki Corporation	Ultra-violent fighting has never looked so good
Fable	Microsoft	Big Blue Box	A special breed of RPG – well worth experiencing
Fahrenheit	Atari	Quantic Dream	A hauntingly beautiful and intriguing adventure game
Forza Motorsport	Microsoft	In-House	No *GT4* comparisons – just a solid Xbox racing game
Jet Set Radio Future	Sega	Smilebit	Cel-shading at its very best and a soundtrack to die for
Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic	Activision	BioWare	One of the best *Star Wars* games ever made
Ninja Gaiden Black	Microsoft	Tecmo	Damn tough, but a great example of style and gameplay
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath	Electronic Arts	Oddworld Inhabitants	A complete change of pace for *Oddworld* that really works
Out Run 2	Sega	Sumo Digital	Stunning reproduction of a great arcade game
Pro Evolution Soccer 5	Konami	In-House	The only football game worth owning, period
Project Zero	Microsoft	Tecmo	Scarier than anything else out there today
Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy	Midway	In-House	An enjoyable and solid psychic blasting romp
Psychonauts	Majesco	Double Fine	Wonderfully unique and enjoyable, if a little short
Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow	Ubisoft	In-House	An essential update to the hugely popular Live game
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	In-House	The best *Splinter Cell* yet, thanks to the co-op mode
Street Fighter Anniversary Collection	Capcom	In-House	The greatest collection of fighting games ever? Oh, hell yes
TimeSplitters: Future Perfect	Electronic Arts	Free Radical	An infinitely expanding universe of online blasting action

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN...

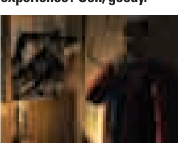
Project Zero
No 360? Can't have a go at *Condemned*? Well, this is just as scary, if not more so – genuine shocks and more besides.



Jet Set Radio Future
Thanks, *Sonic Rush* – you've made us remember just how great the music in Sega's graffiti-'em-up was.



Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory
A great single-player AND a hugely overlooked but incredibly good multiplayer experience? Ooh, goody.



Psychonauts
As mad as a sack of angry badgers, but all the better for it – Tim Schafer's masterpiece is a fine piece of platforming pie.



Ninja Gaiden Black
Now with added bits to appease those of you who were too rubbish to finish the original. You wimps.

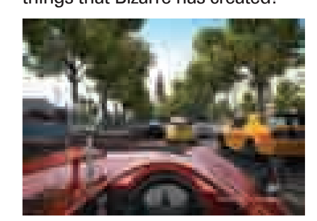





games™ VIEWPOINT

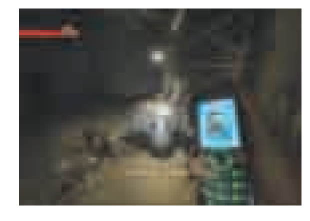
PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

Shhh. Stop those thoughts of the game cheating at being truly high resolution. Stop the arguments about it only running at 30 frames per second. Couldn't you for once just sit back and enjoy the good things that Bizarre has created?



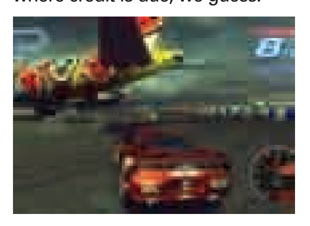
CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

Scary stuff, and no mistake – that's the only way to describe Monolith's first next-gen outing. Sure, it's as short as hell but every moment of it is packed with something to make you either jump, mess yourself or both.



RIDGE RACER 6

That *Ridge Racer 6* caused waves of disappointment to wash over us initially is a shame. That this then turned into powersliding cries of joy is good… even if the whole thing is simply an upgrade of the PSP game. Still, credit where credit is due, we guess.



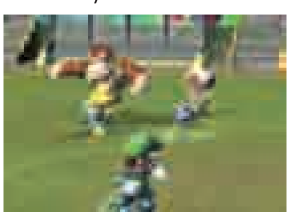
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TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-



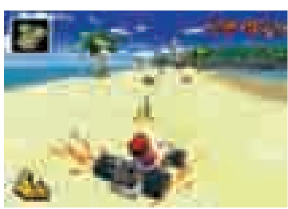
MARIO SMASH FOOTBALL

Perhaps it's slightly worrying for Nintendo that five minutes after turning *Mario Smash Football* off, we were on the phone to Sega asking for copies of the superior *Sega Soccer Slam*. Guess Mario really can't win-a them all…



MARIO KART DS

Then again, there's no doubt that Mario's handheld karting adventure is a return to form for the plump Italian. True, it doesn't take full advantage of the DS but when you can play online for free… well, you're hardly going to kick up a fuss, are you?



BATTALION WARS

We'll admit it – we're incredibly surprised that *Battalion Wars* is as good as it is. Whether that makes us bigger men for admitting we were wrong is neither here nor there, but we're pleased that the *Advance Wars* name has been bolstered rather than sullied.





GAMECUBE

Manufacturer Nintendo
UK Launch Date
3 May 2002
Media
3-inch Optical Disc
Current Price £79.99

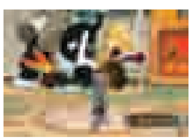
Though the GameCube seems destined to struggle, Nintendo's box of delights is still worth a look. While third-party support is dwindling, it's the first-party releases that really offer some quality gaming. Nintendo still makes some of the finest games ever, so missing out isn't really an option if you love videogames.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE GAMECUBE GAMES

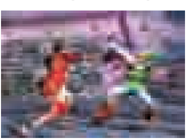
Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Animal Crossing	Nintendo	In-House	The only game to keep us playing for a full year
Alien Hominid IMPORT	03 Entertainment	The Behemoth	Hardcore 2D blasting with a sense of humour
Chibi-Robo IMPORT	Nintendo	Skip	Charming miniature robot fun – simple but effective
Eternal Darkness	Nintendo	Silicon Knights	Scary in a different sense – very intriguing
F-Zero GX	Nintendo	Amusement Vision	Sega does it again with a brilliant retro remake
Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life	Ubisoft	Natsume	Highly absorbing – the *Animal Crossing* of farming games
Ikaruga	Treasure	In-House	Hard as nails and incredibly addictive
Killer7	Capcom	In-House	As arty as it is challenging – truly weird and wonderful
Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour	Nintendo	Camelot	Golfing fun without the need for Tiger Woods
Mario Kart: Double Dash!!	Nintendo	In-House	A grower, by all accounts – take your time and enjoy
Metroid Prime 2: Echoes	Nintendo	In-House	Another great 3D outing for our favourite female bounty hunter
Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door	Nintendo	Intelligent Systems	Hugely entertaining and challenging at the same time
Pikmin 2	Nintendo	In-House	More flowery fun for those of a patient disposition
Resident Evil 4	Capcom	In-House	Reinvention on a scale that brings the series back to life
Soul Calibur II	Namco	In-House	The leader of the pack when it comes to swordplay
Super Mario Sunshine	Nintendo	In-House	Not perfect, but still a very fine *Mario* adventure
Super Monkey Ball 2	Sega	Amusement Vision	Monkeys and balls – what more could you want?
Tales Of Symphonia	Namco	In-House	An absolute beast of an RPG that will dominate your life
Viewtiful Joe 2	Capcom	In-House	A fine return for our favourite side-scrolling superhero
Zelda: The Wind Waker	Nintendo	In-House	Far better than its clueless detractors will have you believe

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

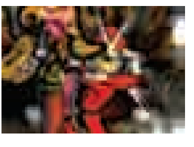
Chibi Robo
Huzzah and hurrah – Nintendo is bringing *Chibi Robo* to western shores. We just hope it does well…



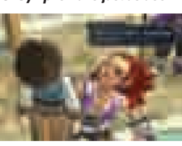
Soul Calibur II
One to go back to if you haven't got a PS2 or have just invested in a progressive scan TV – it really looks lovely.



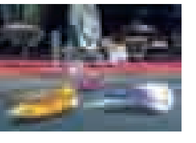
Viewtiful Joe 2
With the disappointment of *Red Hot Rumble* still ringing in our ears, we had to take comfort in the ultra-tough sequel. Damn.



Tales Of Symphonia
Long, strong and very, very comfortable – *Dragon Quest VIII* might be lovely, but *Tales Of Symphonia* is just as ace.



F-Zero GX
Woosh. Vroom. Woah. We can make the noises , but unless we're actually playing *F-Zero*, it's just not the same.









EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE

GBA

Manufacturer Nintendo **UK Launch Date** 22 June 2001
Media Flash Cartridge **Current Price** £69.99



Ideal for gaming on the move, the GBA is a cheap and effective way of getting games to those who don't have time to sit down and play. The leaps in handheld technology mean that GBA games can be compared favourably to their console-based cousins. The lovely SP model is available in a variety of colours, while the even more diminutive Micro is also out to buy now.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE GAME BOY ADVANCE GAMES

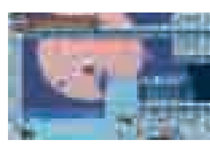
Title	Publisher	Developer
Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising	Nintendo	In-House
Astro Boy: Omega Factor	Sega	Treasure
Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand	Konami	In-House
Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow	Konami	In-House
Final Fantasy Tactics Advance	Nintendo	Square Enix
Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones	Nintendo	In-House
Golden Sun: The Lost Age	Nintendo	Camelot
Harvest Moon: Friends Of Mineral Town	Ubisoft	Natsume
Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga	Nintendo	AlphaDream
Mario Golf: Advance Tour	Nintendo	Camelot
Mario Vs Donkey Kong	Nintendo	In-House
Metroid: Zero Mission	Nintendo	In-House
Pokémon Pinball: Ruby And Sapphire	Nintendo	In-House
Pokémon Emerald	Nintendo	In-House
Shining Force: Resurrection Of The Dark Dragon	THQ	Sega
Street Fighter Alpha 3 Upper	Ubisoft	Crawfish
Super Mario Advance 3: Yoshi's Island	Nintendo	In-House
WarioWare: Twisted!	Nintendo	In-House
Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past/Four Swords	Nintendo	In-House
Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap	Nintendo	Capcom

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

Mario Golf: Advance Tour
Surprisingly good, despite being relegated to the small screen – plenty to do and many, many putts to sink.



Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow
Easily the best of the GBA bunch when it comes to vampire hunting, although it's a trifle short for our extensive tastes.



Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones
A continuation of the excellent *Fire Emblem* series, made all the more compelling by us needing to link it to the GameCube version…



PC

Manufacturer N/A **UK Launch Date** N/A
Media 4.75-inch CD/DVD Disc **Current Price** £variable



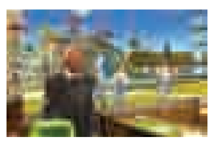
While primarily bought as a work platform, the PC has swiftly become the haven of the more 'mature' gamer. With its natural ability for online and LAN play, it's perfectly tailored for the FPS, strategy and MMORPG genres. However, it can cost a fortune to keep a PC up to date and running fast enough to support flashy graphics and other special effects.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE PC GAMES

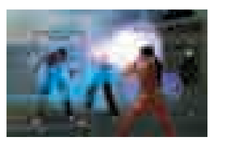
Title	Publisher	Developer
Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	Digital Illusions
City Of Heroes	NCsoft	Cryptic Studios
Far Cry	Ubisoft	Crytek
Football Manager 2005	Sega	Sports Interactive
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North
Grim Fandango	LucasArts	In-House
GTR – FIA GT Racing Game	Atari	SimBin Development
Guild Wars	NCSoft	ArenaNet
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	Valve Software
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	NovaLogic	In-House
Pro Evolution Soccer 4	Konami	In-House
Rise Of Nations	Microsoft	Big Huge Games
Rome: Total War	Activision	Creative Assembly
Sam & Max Hit The Road	Activision	LucasArts
Sensible World Of Soccer	Sensible Software	Renegade
Sid Meier's Pirates!	Atari	Firaxis Games
The Movies	Activision	Lionhead Studios
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	Maxis
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	Epic Games
World Of Warcraft	Vivendi	Blizzard

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

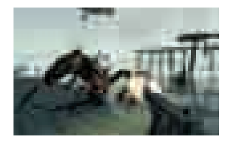
The Movies
See? Peter Molyneux does live up to his promises – *The Movies* is as great a game as we've played, and twice as creative.



City Of Heroes
Villains are great and all, but we're virtuous people at heart – hence, we have to be heroes. Maybe it's the lycra that does it.



Half-Life 2
Better than the Xbox version. Much better. We just wish people who hadn't seen it running on a decent PC didn't disagree…





PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE



NEXT MONTH

180
PAGES FULL OF PHANTASTIC GAMING

gamesTM corners the minds at Sonic Team and talks exclusively about Sega's resurrection of the *Phantasy Star* series – can it conquer the online console world all over again?



It's so pretty, oh so pretty – but will the actual fighting stand up to the quality of the visuals?

MORE… REVIEWS

All may be quiet on the Western Front but that doesn't mean we won't have any reviews for you next month. Instead, we'll be combining the minimal spread of domestic releases with a host of goodies from overseas – *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows, Me And My Katamari, Stubbs The Zombie* and the long-awaited *Dead Or Alive 4* will be among those under scrutiny.

"THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF HYPE… WE JUST HOPE TECMO CAN LIVE UP TO IT."



All the sideways drifting goodness, but on the PS2. And PC. And even the PSP, dammit.

MORE… PREVIEWS

So that's it then. The next generation is here. That means we'll be able to put plenty more games on the radar for you over the coming months and January will be no exception. As well as play-testing the new *Splinter Cell*, we'll be following the likes of *Paperman, Spore, Alone In The Dark* and the next *OutRun* title as well as a heap of other loveliness.

"IT'S OUTRUN, BUT MORE – AND THERE WAS PLENTY OF IT LAST TIME AROUND"



Here's a sneak preview – *Pac-Man* only got to 92 in the top 100. We're as outraged as you are.

MORE… FEATURES

What is your favourite retro game of all time? *Dizzy*? *Super Mario 64*? *Greendog*? The votes are in, so next issue we'll have the run-down of your top 100, which will no doubt cause more arguments than it settles. Also, we investigate the booming phenomenon of Alternate Reality Gaming and give you the lowdown on the resurrection of Xbox Live, 360-style.





ON SALE 26 JAN 06

CONTACT

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There are many wonderful ways to get in touch with games™. The traditional postal method is perfectly acceptable using the address below:

games™, Highbury Entertainment, Paragon House, St Peters Road, Bournemouth, BH1 2JS

However, there are quicker ways to reach us thanks to the technological marvel that is the internet. Email us at this address: **gamestm@paragon.co.uk**

Alternatively, why not get yourself on our dedicated forum?

Step One:
Get yourself online. It's fairly simple, so we're sure you'll think of something.

Step Two:
Type the following into the browser window: **www.gamestm.co.uk**
You will arrive at the **games™** website. Nice, isn't it? Click on the 'forum' icon near the top of the page. If you're a first-time visitor to the forum you'll have to register before you can post. Just click 'register', fill in a few details (such as a username and password) and you're away.

Step Three:
Ha! There is no step three. It's that simple. Just choose which thread looks most interesting then post your deepest, darkest thoughts (preferably concerning gaming) in there. There's even a dedicated letters thread where you can post anything you'd like to see on these pages.

games™ reserves the right to edit letters for space and/or clarity. The views expressed in letters on these pages are those of the correspondents and not **games™**. If you want a healthy debate, we'll see you on the forum…

So, it seems I missed my 'guaranteed' pre-order slot by two days. I accept that I'm responsible for that (after all, market forces and so on) but on launch day I got a teensy bit annoyed seeing all the Xbox 360s on eBay, with one bloke in particular having four for sale. Now, I know it's almost impossible to police these launches but the whole fiasco has left a bitter taste in my mouth. Could there not have been a preference exercise for existing Xbox owners, seeing as we're all on Microsoft's database? Let's hope Sony and Nintendo do things a bit differently, although from past experience… I doubt it.

Because of this, I have a cunning plan: I'm going to force Bill Gates to reduce the price by NOT buying one, thus bringing the mighty corporation to its knees (yeah, right). I'll see how long my resolve lasts when I finally see a shiny new 360 in a shop, whispering 'buy me' because, let's face it, we all want them now. Unfortunately 'they' know this only too well…
Ian Barrett

games™: Yes, apparently 'they' do. Of course, you're not the only one who's been left wanting for a 360 – seems the best part of the games-buying public is still queuing up outside their local store, hoping something might appear. Not that they will, you understand… not yet, anyway. Seems like unless you want to cave to the unscrupulous eBay-types, you're a bit stuffed for now. And speaking of which…

With the Xbox 360 FINALLY upon us, I'd just like to comment on Microsoft's launch strategy. We're still not entirely sure if the shortage is a deliberate marketing ploy or a genuine oversight on the part of Gates and his minions, but I can't help but find it slightly bizarre that we're seeing a multi-million pound advertising campaign on our TV screens when no one can actually buy the machine. The people who managed to get a 360 at launch are not the people Microsoft is aiming for with the new campaign, so why deny the mainstream consumers the ability to purchase the machine while simultaneously forcing it down their throats?
Phil Winston

games™: Ah, but it's all about maximising your profile, isn't it? At least, we suspect that's the plan. Personally, we'd have rather seen Microsoft hold off on the launch for another six months and spend that time, say, making some more machines. Could have proved rather useful come launch day, that… but then, best-laid plans and all that. We just pray that Nintendo and Sony are paying attention – if it happens again come the Revolution and PlayStation3, you can be sure it's more than just a coincidence.

I am writing in response to Julian Hill's letter concerning mainstream acceptance for videogames. It's a subject that has been discussed for years now, but I question Julian's need for validation of his hobby. I understand his questioning of retro gaming as a fashion statement, but surely he must realise that the fashionistas of this world are never setting trends, but merely following them. All it takes is for Beckham or Timberlake to wear something once, and it's all over the high

"COULD THERE NOT HAVE BEEN A **PREFERENCE EXERCISE** FOR **EXISTING XBOX OWNERS**, SEEING AS WE'RE ALL ON **MICROSOFT'S DATABASE**? LET'S HOPE **SONY AND NINTENDO** MANAGE TO **DO THINGS A BIT DIFFERENTLY…**"



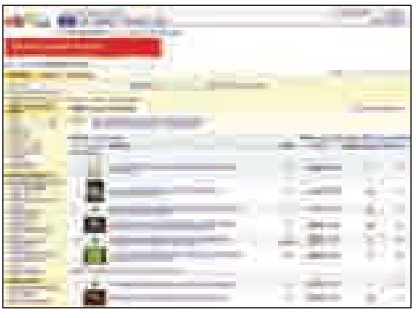
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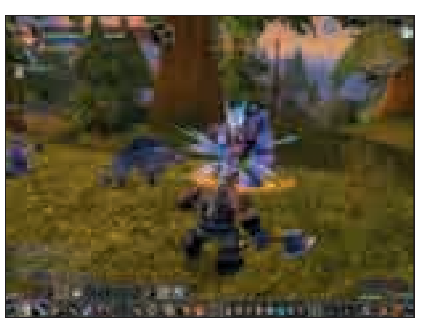
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Quit your whining – there are still plenty of Xbox 360s left on eBay. Although obviously, you need to be a millionaire to afford one.



Abuse is apparently rife in MMO games like *World Of Warcraft*… could such problems be messing up the minds of underage players?

street within days. Wear what you want, Julian, but don't expect people to care.
Chris Logan

games™: There speaks a man who knows his mind… or rather, his wardrobe. Of course, we don't see anything wrong in following trends so long as it makes us look good – fashion's a subjective thing, after all, and it's likely that not everyone would find our favourite *Manic Miner* t-shirt as exciting as we do. Although perhaps that says far more about us as people than we might like.

Like any MMO, *World Of Warcraft* has its abusers. Sadly, the chat element of the game is being used by players intent not upon questing but rather on mass slurring, manipulating and bullying players for sport. The Whisper spamming of homophobic, anti-family and racist insults is rife, as is the formation of single country nationalist guilds. What's more, the GMs cannot possibly respond in an appropriate time frame due to the chat speed.

This, unfortunately, can only be expected from an MMO, but what disturbs me is that this game is rated 12+ by the PEGI despite such online content. I called them up via the Video Standards Council. It seems the 12+ certificate does not cover the online aspect of the game, but does cover the single player, despite the fact that there IS no single-player. I am disgusted that the 12+ certificate means absolutely nothing once you begin to play the game. The PEGI states that it doesn't enforce regulation on online elements; Blizzard also inevitably fails to regulate them effectively due to the sheer volume of players. This means, effectively, that the PEGI rating does not relate in any way to *World Of Warcraft*'s actual online experience – and there are plenty of kids playing online.

Surely there ought to be more regulation imposed? Quite apart from the effects which the flagrant abuse of the chat lines causes adults, 12 year olds could theoretically legally be playing a game with such dangerous content, where being killed is referred to as being 'Oeraped' online. And that's not even mentioning the under-12s who will inevitably be taking part in the game. Should MMOs have a different rating system, or certain highly moderated servers free from such abuse?
Ob (guild leader of The Leopard Fang Clan)

games™: We'd love to agree with you wholeheartedly, but it's hard to see how such a system could ever be implemented. Unless each player on a server was tracked by their own personal bodyguard, it'd be virtually impossible to protect people from abuse (in whatever form) and even if you did… well,

CONTACT

ILLUMINATING THE WORLD OF games™

Enough of what we think, this is where you lot get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry

Text Life

I didnt get my 360! Waaah! Waaah!
g™: Tell it to the mountain, friend… the mountain of people in exactly the same position as you. We're just glad we're not one of them.

Wasnt this xmas a little bit disappointing for games?
g™: Not really, no – there might not have been a *GTA* or *Halo*, but at least there were plenty of solid titles for us to play.

They're re-releasing Ico again! Excellent!
g™: We know, we know… and it means that there's no excuse for every single gamer in the country not to own it. If you don't buy it, we'll hate you forever.

What do you prefer – PSP or DS?
g™: Both, of course… what a silly question. But that said, we seem to be using the DS far more as of late – thanks, *Animal Crossing*.

Can I have your gamertags?
g™: That depends. Are you the kind of person who refers to themselves as 'teh roxors'? Do you ask people if they 'like that, bitch?' when you frag them? If so, you don't want to be our friend. Really, you don't.

Why did u say that the Xbox 360 was rubbish last month?
g™: We didn't. Let us guess… you got the black cover, right? Typical. If only you actually thought to read the magazine…

Hope you guys had a great xmas.
g™: What, a Christmas full of *Guitar Hero* (the office copy, sadly) *Animal Crossing, Dragon Quest VIII* and the Xbox 360? No, it was awful. Really awful.

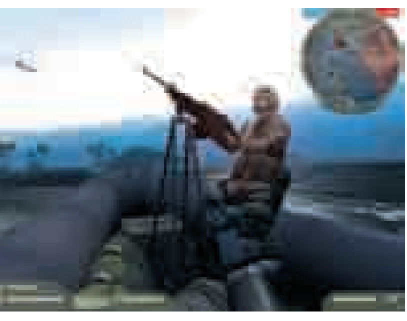
Daddy or chips?
g™: We'd give you an honest answer, but you've brought back horrible memories of our childhoods. You bastard.



"And here, Ms Hilton is sporting a lovely off-the-shoulder number that she'll soon be hawking over on eBay for a few hundred dollars."

how would cutting people off promote the 'completely free' world that most MMORPGs offer? The only real solution, aside from making the warning that's on all online games ("Gameplay experience may change online") more prominent and self-explanatory to parents, is to have servers set aside for under-age gamers… but we can't see that going down very well at all, especially since it opens all kind of doors – particularly of the 'adult posing as a child' variety – that really should remain shut.

Just recently I've been browsing the internet and have become increasingly annoyed by the celebrities that I spy touting the wares of some of the larger publishers. I speak, of course, of the recent snaps of Paris Hilton and Justin Timberlake strolling out of the US 360 launch party grasping a new console. It strikes me as unfair that dedicated gamers, such as myself, are forced to browse eBay and – here in the UK – wait until February to even stand a chance of getting the machine, but celebs just get handed them as a form of promotion. Strangely enough, I don't want a 360 any more now than I did before Hilton got her mitts on one, in the same way as I still don't want a tiny dog. I just wish there was a way we could stop all these celebs muscling in on console launches It's very annoying.
Paul Tills

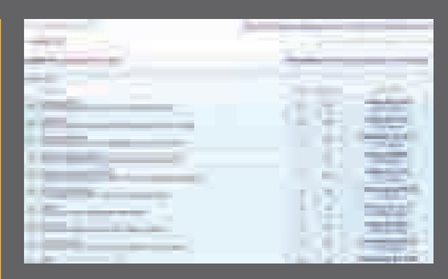


Don't worry, PC fans – just because the next-generation of consoles are here, doesn't mean the AAA titles are going to dry up for you.

games™: Frankly, we couldn't agree more… although that may be more to do with the fact that we didn't receive the same treatment at the UK Xbox 360 launch party and left with only a spacial faceplate to show for our attendence. Don't they know who we are? What's more annoying, though, is that you know Paris Hilton won't even open hers – she'll probably put it in a cupboard full of shoes and forget about it. Either that or put it on eBay for a ridiculous sum of money, the cheeky young hussy.

I have to admit that I'm not the biggest console gamer, but I am a huge fan of PC gaming and have lost many hours to the various MMORPGs that are around at the moment. My concern with the next-generation consoles having boosted online abilities however, is will we be seeing a decline in good PC titles? There are many people that would prefer to be playing games such as *Guild Wars* from their sofa, rather than stuck in front of a monitor, and if PC gamers start to make the switch, surely developers will turn their attentions to the more popular console market. I feel this would be a shame, as no matter how great the new consoles are, I'm sure they'll never match the experience of playing triple-A titles on a top-of-the-range PC – but just how many are going to realise this?
Lee Price





FROM THE FORUM

DEFINING CASUAL GAMING

games™: It's a difficult balance, to be sure, but we doubt the PC market will ever be truly forgotten. Don't forget, home computer gaming has been around almost as long as consoles have (we recall playing some great PC games back when the SNES was just teething) and there's a huge audience out there for the right kind of games – games that, to be fair, don't always work when transferred to a console. Never mind the online side or even the graphical boost; PC gaming's as much a state of mind as it is a technological hobby. The games will keep coming, without doubt… although we can't guarantee their quality, obviously.

Many people, myself included, preferred *GTA III* to *Vice City* so suffice to say, a handheld version with decent draw distance, minimal loading times, and new characters and missions is enticing. But beyond the hype and excitement, is there room for a little cynicism? Will millions of players be paying for essentially the same shiny black toy and *GTA* disc they bought in 2001? Okay, so you can play it on the bus/toilet. But will it take advantage of its new home? The game will inevitably sell truckloads, send the hardware sales sky-high… but does it really deserve to?
Sally French

games™: Yes, it does, as you'll see from our review last month. Certainly, there's a case for wondering whether Rockstar has been cheeky re-using old materials to create a new game but considering the quality of what's there, that hardly matters. And it's not like the general masses will notice much anyway…

Over the last couple of months, I couldn't help but notice that several chronically poor releases have failed to make it into your hallowed pages, among them things like *Shadow The Hedgehog* and *50 Cent: Bulletproof*. But at the same time, you seem perfectly happy to sacrifice two pages to both mediocre games and games that have been out for a while when one would surely suffice to make room for these missing games.
I know you guys enjoy giving games a good kicking once in a while – some of your low-scoring reviews have been among my favourite pieces you've ever run – and surely it's your duty to alert readers to the dangers of these catastrophic games. While I wouldn't touch Fiddy's mess of a game, I do have a soft spot for Sega and so hoping it wouldn't be as bad as everyone was saying, it turns out I should have listened to the booming voice of reason after all. Luckily I kept my receipt, so it wasn't all bad. Still, it's this strange omission of reviews that I'm really intrigued about – I was so looking forward to Shadow getting something of a taste as it seems to have done in most other mags. Were you, perhaps, not allowed to review such drivel to keep people happy or is **games™** simply going soft in its old age?
Tompey Selfton

games™: Hmm. We'd hope you'd know by now that we're not in the business of 'keeping people happy' – if a game sucks, we'll happily tell you so. Even so, you have to consider whether people would be forewarned; our preview of *Shadow* said enough, while we didn't even touch Mr Cent (and that should tell you everything you need).

"I COULDN'T HELP BUT NOTICE THAT SEVERAL **CHRONICALLY POOR RELEASES** HAVE **FAILED TO MAKE IT TO REVIEW**… WERE YOU PERHAPS NOT ALLOWED TO **COVER SUCH DRIVEL** IN ORDER TO **KEEP CERTAIN PEOPLE HAPPY**?"

HankWang
It's still strange to me that between five and seven years on from the point that the internet penetrated the mass market, the argument of being a casual or hardcore gamer still remains as one of the major questions approaching any computer-savvy console kid. Presumably, most of you will have considered yourself to be 'hardcore' at one game or another in your time gaming. At what point would you define a gamer as casual or hardcore? Is it enough to pick up, put down and enjoy a game at will, or do you need to squeeze every last secret out to immerse yourself in a game's universe? More importantly, to you, are you happy with being referred to as casual if it means that you can really enjoy videogames?

Corrupt Rose
Personally, I don't think I'm particularly hardcore; for me, that definition would almost have to place videogames at the very centre of my life, to the preclusion of other things. That isn't the case for me. I've got a university course to get on with fouling up, and the odd social event to shamble to. On the other hand, I really enjoy videogames for the most part. I've grown a little weary of them of late, but I think it's got a lot to do with the number of RTSs I've been playing lately. Since I've got back onto Xbox Live and picked up a joypad again, things have got a lot better, and I've been enjoying myself more, knocking Jim and Singho off the track on *PGR2*, and claiming it was somebody else, as well as other things.

Owain
Right… there are people that enjoy jogging, and then there are runners. There are people that play guitar, and then there are guitarists. And then there are casuals – 'This game is wicked'; there are gamers – "Woah, I just got a great lap time"; and there's the hardcore – "Woah, I've perfected every corner perfectly and I'm third fastest ever on this track, with all cars unlocked – well worth the four months I spent practicing." There you go… casual gaming defined.

davejm
Who really is 'hardcore'? Everyone devotes a differing amount of time to gaming, so is someone more 'hardcore' than someone else because they've mastered a specific game?

I'd say I'm definitely a casual gamer, in that I don't have a great deal of time to spend with games, but I'd say I take more of an interest in gaming than many 'high street' casual gamers… for want of a better term.

If someone plays games to such an extent that he wants to call himself a 'hardcore gamer' then fair do's, let them keep the term for themselves while we just enjoy the games that we do play as and when we can… whether that's every now and again, or every night.



games™